Universidade de Aveiro Departamento de Línguas e Culturas
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Estratégias Textuais e o Eu em *Elizabeth Costello*, de J. M. Coetzee

Textual Strategies and the Self in J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*

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Dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Estudos Ingleses, realizada sob a orientação científica do Prof. Dr. David Callahan, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro

o júri

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palavras-chave

Autoria, autobiografia, humanidades, intertextualidade prelecções narrativas, metaficção.

resumo

A presente dissertação propõe examinar questões relacionadas com textualidade, autoria e auto-crítica levantadas no romance *Elizabeth Costello*, de J. M. Coetzee. A análise pondera também outros textos do autor, cujas obras são manifestamente metaficcionais, e abarca igualmente textos de literatura inglesa. O âmago dos assuntos aqui referidos prende-se com a intertextualidade, o hibridismo e a fluidez da escrita, incita debates sobre a ética das humanidades, e discussões literárias sobre o sentido de humanidade. Os temas romanceados em *Elizabeth Costello* constituem um todo devido ao papel predominante que a protagonista desempenha nas prelecções narrativas deste romance.

keywords

Authorship, autobiography, humanities, intertextuality, lecture-narratives, metafiction.

abstract

This Dissertation is centred on the study of issues of textuality, authorship and self-examination raised in J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*. This analysis also traces back to other novels by Coetzee which are overtly metafictional, and to other literary works in English. At the core of these discussions are intertextuality, the hybridity and fluidity of novel writing, ethical debates about the humanities, and literary incursions into the meaning of humanity. The questions broached in *Elizabeth Costello* all coalesce due to the protagonist's predominant role in the lecture-narrative structure of the novel.

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A space where meanings cross:
Elizabeth Costello and the intertextual

1. Intertextuality: From Bakhtinian dialogism to postmodern Menippean discourse

Contemporary literature has already laid out the groundwork for the analysis and critique of the study of intertexts and intertextuality as a practice which has been fostered by present-day writers, and particularly postmodern authors. Intertextuality acknowledges that no text can be read comprehensively without the reader being fully aware that there are prior texts which mould the reading process. The idea that there are autonomous texts or works seems absurd nowadays since postmodernism concerned itself with this issue. In *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge briefly points out "that all texts are woven from the tissues of other texts, whether their authors know it or not" (98-99). Ultimately, intertextuality is a body of entwined relationships which Brenda Marshall describes as "the multiple writings – cultural, literary, historical, psychological – that come together at any 'moment' in a particular text" (122).

Critical enthusiasm for intertextuality has revived intellectual attention to the concept of allusion. The current term of intertextuality includes literary echoes and allusions as one of the many ways in which any text is interlinked with other texts. In an essay entitled "Towards a Descriptive Poetics of *Allusion*" Udo J. Hebel argues that

> Within the large frame of intertextual theory, as it has been laid out by Kristeva and her disciples, *allusion* becomes the over-arching category under which quite divers devices for establishing verifiable intertextual relations can be subsumed. (137)

Thinkers of allusional studies have come to concede that allusion can contain quotations, whether marked or unmarked, into its larger category. The redefinition of allusional theory expands from the covertness of allusions and highlights the interest in allusion as an intertextual method. Hebel maintains "a working definition of *allusion* as evocative manifestation of intertextual relationships" (135 italics in original). In order to be successful an allusion should enhance the text in which it is resituated by overwhelming simple denotation and encouraging productive and uncanny associations. Moreover, allusions should be understood as engaging in a dialogic process in which the "allusive signals are to be studied as fragments of the intertextual *déjà*, as metonymic elements participating in – at least – two systems of signification" (Hebel 139). The primary concern in postmodern aesthetics is the (re)interpretation of the alluded-to referent and not the mere identification of the allusion often maintained by traditional allusional studies. Postmodern writing has emphasised the dialogic nature of the links between alluding texts and recalled referents in a context which Hebel describes as "the Bakhtin-renaissance … [where] any allusion involves a commentary

about a text, person, or event called up" (139). However, the actualisation of the promising potential of allusions hinges on the competence of the informed reader because it implies a substantial repertoire of knowledge on the side of the reader. An informed reader is for Hebel "the text archeologist" whose efforts are concentrated on restoring the "text's associative verticality that purely syntagmatic readings are inclined to disregard" (141) so as to widen a text's semantic openness and avoid gaps in historically and culturally removed texts.

Intertextuality cannot be reduced to simplistic references or allusions to preceding texts, but is also a manipulation and may even be a parody of those texts. From the early nineteenth century to the present, parody has been the favourite form of the burlesque. It imitates the form and style or else the subject matter of a serious literary work or a literary genre. The ordered, stable and inherently meaningful worldview of the long nineteenth century did not conform to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which characterised twentieth-century history. Modernism thus marked a distinctive break with Victorian bourgeois morality by rejecting nineteenth-century optimism. Modernists presented a profoundly pessimistic picture of a culture in disarray. The term modernism refers to a radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities evident in the art and literature of the post-World War I period. The specific features signified by modernism vary with the user, but many critics argue that it involves a deliberate disruption of some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general. Important thinkers of modernism questioned the certainties which had supported established modes of social organisation, religion, and morality, and also ways of perceiving the self. In literature, the movement is associated with the works of (among many others) T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka and Fernando Pessoa. The year 1922 alone was noteworthy for the simultaneous appearance of such markers of modernist innovation as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, as well as many other experimental texts of literature. Modernism is often derided for abandoning the social world in favour of a narcissistic interest in language and its processes. Although, the fragmented, non-chronological poetic forms utilised by Eliot and Pound revolutionised not only poetic language but also an approach to being in the world in general.

Like Joyce in *Ulysses* and like Pound in his *Cantos* (1925-60), Eliot experimented with new forms and a new style that renders disorder, often contrasting it to a lost order that is based on religion and myths of the past. In *The Waste Land* (1922), for instance, Eliot replaced the standard syntactic flow of poetic language with fragmented utterances, and a dislocation of

parts, in which different sections are related by connections which the reader must discover. In a critical reading of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Manju Jain writes that it "subverts the idea of organic unity, since it is composed of a plurality of voices, quotations from several texts, and a variety of languages, styles and genres. The poem alludes to several systems" (132). Questions about form and about the writing process fade away when one understands that fragments of the poem were being written for almost a decade before its final publication in 1922. The poem is thus a multiplicity of fragmentary monologues "continu[ing] Eliot's preoccupation with the fragmented, shifting, discontinuous nature of identity. The different voices and points of view shift, merge, dissolve, collide, so that the boundaries between them cannot easily be demarcated" (Jain 134). The poetic persona also assumes various voices from the past expressed by allusions and direct quotations that reverberate against each other, which nonetheless does not mean that the persona is deprived of uttering his personal experience. Jain argues that the "allusions also function as fragments of consciousness and modes of perception to provide alternative points of view" (137) as the poet explores the relationship of different temporal perspectives as they are juxtaposed as in a collage. Resorting to literary tradition is not a passive practice because it becomes a subjective and entirely individual composition, and in turn the reading process is much more demanding and elusive. Manju Jain says that "the poet interprets the past in his selection, arrangement, and treatment of allusions, styles, and genres. The reader … is confronted with the double difficulty of interpreting the function of the allusions within the poem, and of placing and interpreting the source text" (137). In T. S. Eliot's case the range of reference and interpretations he includes in his poem take in varied myths and rituals usually dismissed by the West. *The Waste Land* should not be read as a single unitary identity made up of the merging of plural voices, but it should be looked at as a unit of differences and meanings that are waiting to be engaged with by the reader.

Major works of modernist fiction, following Joyce's *Ulysses* and his even more radical *Finnegans Wake* (1939), subvert the basic conventions of earlier prose fiction by breaking up narrative continuity, departing from the usual way of representing characters, and using stream of consciousness as a mode of narration. Joyce situated himself at the heart of modernism by exploring modern day life in Dublin through a classical text. In the Introduction to her *A Companion to James Joyce's* Ulysses, Margot Norris provides a brief summary of the novel's plot:

> *Ulysses*, a modern psychological reenactment of the events of Homer's *Odyssey*, was to interweave the life of the young artist with that of a Jewish-Irish couple, Leopold and Molly

> Bloom, on a single day in 1904 Dublin … a richly textured and ever-changing narrative reflecting states of individual consciousness mingled with a variety of public and cultural discourses. (11)

The novel is made up of three parts which were conventionally called 'The Telemachiad', 'The Wanderings of Odysseus' and 'The Homecoming', that in turn are comprised of eighteen episodes keeping to Homeric parallels, the novel's chief Greek intertext being Homer's *Odyssey*. Critics maintain that Joyce first encountered the Greek epic when he read Charles Lamb's version called *Adventures of Ulysses*, which according to Walton Litz fused "realistic action and symbolism … Lamb's 'mystical' view of the *Odyssey* … had a lasting influence on Joyce's imagination, proving to him that the Homeric plot could be recreated in the language of contemporary life and used as foundation for symbolic actions" (1). Joyce's text depends on complex internal and external allusions, and each fragment of material constitutes a place in the whole pattern that is ultimately converted into a vast image. He was able "to unify *Ulysses* through a network of interlocking motifs and cross-references. Like a mosaic worker, he began with the basic outlines of his work and elaborated upon them" (Litz 32). Many early critics of Joyce believed that he invoked the greatness of an ancient hero so as to censure the bourgeois, just as some asserted that Eliot evoked Greek and Elizabethan England to mock the modern metropolis. In this sense, Joyce and Eliot's use of myth may be called ironic or parodic.

James Joyce mockingly dismissed nineteenth-century realism because it was founded on chronological action and its fiction was composed of dramatic and expository passages which he could not employ. He experimented with the possibilities of English prose and showed preoccupation with linguistic as well as narrative innovation. Joycean aesthetic innovations also include his stoppages and commentary in his own work, unthought-of for the realists. Declan Kiberd writes that "the critical interjections of Joyce in *Ulysses* … form an organic part of *Ulysses* which is unthinkable without them" (xxxii) underlining the idea that "the best literature is an act of profound criticism, and the finest criticism is literature in the highest sense" (xxxiv). *Ulysses* asserted its comprehensive self-criticism and self-mockery during a time of transition, and even when postmodernism emerged Joyce's epic work was not diminished. His novel is still contemporary since it is based on the perception that styles are interchangeable much like people, as Joyce understood them to be. He saw himself as "a scissors and paste man" (Kiberd xlviii) who appropriated Homer's plot, and borrowed from Dubliners their verbal language and imitated their speech acts not in a process of creation but

as both homage and parody. Kiberd affirms that "parody is the act of a trapped mind which, realizing that it cannot create anew, takes its revenge by defacing the masterpieces of the past" (xlviii). It is the technique used in *The Waste Land* and in *Ulysses* to depict the morose modern world. Indeed, in this sense, Kiberd holds that "Joyce made his parodies the basis of a serious case against literature itself" (xlix) so that the style of *Ulysses* reminds the reader that the finest literary piece is always a parodic imitation of the experience of "real life."

Elizabeth Dipple, in *The Unresolvable Plot*, argues that "parody requires redefinition, because for many readers it still carries negative connotations indicating a degradation of a primary text by the wit of a destructively comic imitation" (9) which is only overcome with a "more sophisticated idea of the positive effects of parody as a meditation on the literatures and texts of the past." (9). As contemporary parody manipulates new texts by echoing previous ones, it enriches acts of literature rather than disparaging them. Parody is usually considered essential to postmodernism in that postmodern writings subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience. One of the arguments Linda Hutcheon posits, in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, is that postmodernism "ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge" (1-2). Hutcheon goes on to state that "postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations" (94). Postmodern parody critically and constructively rereads the past in order to highlight the limits and the powers of representation since art is tied to its aesthetic and social past. The notion of intertextuality seems to have been coined under the great arch that is postmodernism, though it is not a phenomenon exclusive to postmodernist aesthetics. In "How Postmodern is Intertextuality?" Manfred Pfister argues that "from the earliest traceable origins onwards, literary texts have always referred not only to reality (*imitatio uitae*), but also to previous other texts (*imitation ueterum*)" (210). What remains to be deciphered is whether there is a specific kind of postmodern intertext, despite the fact that intertextuality has been heralded as a unique characteristic of postmodernism.

Another voice which speaks out about the relatedness of texts is that of Heinrich F. Plett who, in his essay entitled "Intertextualities," maintains that the intertext has attributes that go beyond its quintessence:

> It is not delimited, but de-limited, for its constituents refer to constituents of one or several other text. Therefore it has a twofold coherence: an *intra*textual one which guarantees the

> immanent integrity of the text, and an *inter*textual one which creates structural relations between itself and other texts. (5 italics in original)

Consequently, one cannot consider a single text in isolation because a new text always relates to others, and in turn it becomes the precursor of future texts. Plett refers to this byplay as the "retrospective" and "prospective" dimensions of the text. A text is, at the same time, post-text and pre-text confirming that there is no time-bound feature in the arts when talking about the intertextual. However, one must recognise there are cultural trends that exacerbate it more than others do, and the twentieth century saw this tendency in modernism and postmodernism. For Plett temporality becomes an important question when intertextuality is concerned since

> It is interpreted from two radically opposite perspectives, a synchronic and a diachronic one. The synchronic perspective claims that all texts possess a simultaneous existence. This entails the levelling of all temporal differences; history is suspended in favour of the co-presence of the past … any text can be interrelated to any other text. (25)

Admitting that new texts depend on prior texts, and then it is safe to argue that the creative author is free to write and trace relations between texts which are diachronically separate. Until and including the eighteenth century, writers made copious references to other texts, mostly the classics.

The term intertextuality was popularised especially by Julia Kristeva and connected to her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel." In Kristeva's formulation, accordingly, any text is in fact an intertext; the site of an intersection of numberless other texts, and indeed existing only through its relations to others. Kristeva's work stands beside another seminal poststructuralist thinker like Roland Barthes, who in his essay "From Work to Text," claims the text is plural. Barthes asserts that

> The Text is not a coexistence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers … [to] a dissemination … The plural of the Text depends … not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the *stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers (etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric). (288 italics in original)

In his essay, Barthes establishes the differences between the work and the text and undermines the anachronistic views of traditional critics who have conceived the literary work as the isolated object of their critical concern. The dissimilarities which Barthes describes are as follows: "the work can be seen … the text is a process of demonstration, speaks according to certain rules (or against certain rules); the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse" (286). In this sense, the text depends on

the reader's collaboration to diminish the distance between writing and reading so as to join the reader and the text in what Barthes calls "a single signifying practice" (290). This unifying process Barthes proposes leads to the 'disappearance' of the author, which denies the fundamental role of the uniquely individual author in western thought, who is regarded as the origin of all knowledge. Barthes's use of the text and intertext theory shatters the myth of filiation usually related to the literary work: "The work is caught up in a process of filiation … The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work … As for the Text, it reads without the inscription of the Father" (289). On Barthes's views, Graham Allen says that "the modern scriptor … is always already in a process of reading and re-writing. Meaning comes not from the author but from language viewed intertextually" (74).

In her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel," Julia Kristeva formulates and develops the notion of intertextuality taking into account her revisions to her reading of the Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Kristeva examines the word's status as signifier within the sentence and then the relations it articulates on a larger scale, pointing out that the three categories of dialogue are writing subject, addressee and exterior texts. Hence, for Kristeva, the word's status is

> thus defined *horizontally* (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as *vertically* (the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus) … Hence horizontal axis (subject – addressee) and vertical axis (text – context) coincide … each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. (36-37)

These two axes are called dialogue and ambivalence in Bakhtin's findings, and Kristeva further builds upon these notions to demonstrate how poetic language is read as double. Writers communicate to their readers at the same time as their texts communicate the existence of preceding texts within them. Recognising that the horizontal and vertical axes coexist in the text redefines Bakhtin's theory of dialogism which draws on intertextuality. To Bakhtin, a literary work is a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices or modes of discourse. A person's speech, composed of languages from diverse contexts, does not express an autonomous individuality; instead, the character emerges in the course of the dialogue. Bakhtin writes that

> The language used by characters in the novel, how they speak, is verbally and semantically autonomous; each character's speech possesses its own belief system … Even in those places where the author's voice seems at first glance to be unitary and consistent, direct and unmediatedly intentional, beneath that smooth single-languaged surface we can nevertheless uncover prose's three-dimensionality, its profound speech diversity. (315)

So every character in the dialogic novel has a unique personality which involves a specific worldview articulated by means of the character's words.

Mikhail Bakhtin's prime interest was in the novel, and especially in the ways the voices that constitute the text disrupt the authority of the author's single voice. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), he contrasts the monologic novels of Leo Tolstoy, which subordinate the voices of all the characters to the controlling purposes of the author, to the dialogic form (or polyphonic form) of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels, in which the characters are allowed to speak independent voices and consciousness. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin maintains that "the human being in the novel is first, foremost and always a speaking human being; the novel requires speaking persons bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse, their own language" (332). Therefore, the novel is constituted by a multiplicity of contending voices which achieve full meaning only through dialogic interaction both with each other and with the narrator's voice. The polyphonic novel represents a world in which no individual discourse stands above another, but discourses are interpretations of and responses to the world, which is literally dialogic. Furthermore, in the Bakhtinian polyphonic novel, the speech of characters is always heteroglot, a double-voiced discourse that Bakhtin describes as serving "two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions … these two voices are dialogically interrelated." (324). Dialogic relationships inside an utterance are what Bakhtin means by double-voicedness that he studied as heteroglossia, which "once incorporated into the novel, is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (324). So all utterances depend on or call to other utterances in competing and conflicting voices, eventually defining the major theory of intertextuality.

In her *The Unresolvable Plot*, Elizabeth Dipple says that no book is an independent unit, and self-referentiality is impossible. In narratological studies, and according to Dipple,

> …the pressure of anterior literature is always present in the act of reading – the experience of past books … intrudes fruitfully on our reception of the present one … one thinks … of Nabokov's *Lolita* in the 1960s, of Pynchon's difficult novels in the 1970s, or of Eco's *The Name of the Rose* in the 1980s. (10)

One should bear in mind that she is talking of the period of greatest attention paid to these novels. If one follows Dipple's reasoning one can pin point a passage in Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) which illustrates its position on interrelatedness. A discussion about books and their inseparability between William and Adso, the two main characters in the novel, is what

triggers the text's focus on intertextuality. Throughout the novel both characters are engaged in discussing diverse metaphysical issues, and despite the novel's ecclesiastical themes, the characters' findings shed some light on the intertextual. The dialogue starts when young Adso asks surprised: "To know what one book says you must read others?" (286) and William answers him by knowingly stating that "often books speak of other books. Often a harmless book is like a seed that will blossom into a dangerous book, or it is the other way around" (286). Adso finally understands the influence of multiple readings and the echoing of texts:

> Until then I had thought each book spoke of the things, human or divine, that lie outside books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves … the library … was then the place of a long, centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another. (286)

Hence, a book is made up of signs which reflect other signs, which in their turn gesture towards varying signifieds. Eco's protagonist best exemplifies this affirmation when he says that "without an eye to read them, a book contains signs that produce no concepts; therefore it is dumb" (396).

Further on in her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel," Kristeva systematises three categories of words within the narrative; the direct word, the object-oriented word, and the ambivalent word. Both the direct (or denotative) word and the object-oriented word are, according to Kristeva, univocal seeing as

> The *denotative* word … knows nothing but itself and its object … (it is not 'conscious' of the influences of words foreign to it) … the *object-oriented* word is the direct discourse of 'characters'. It has direct, objective meaning, but is not situated on the same level as the writer's discourse … it is at some distance from the latter. (43)

In light of this reasoning, Kristeva maintains that when a writer uses another's word

> giving it a new meaning while retaining the meaning it already had … [the] result is a word with two significations: it becomes *ambivalent*. This ambivalent word is therefore the result of a joining of two sign-systems. Within the evolution of genres, ambivalent words appear in Menippean and carnivalesque texts. (43-44)

The joining of two sign-systems relativises the text, and the words of the author are an appropriation of another's speech for his own reasons to follow and relativise. A discourse which claims to appropriate preceding speeches is a dialogical discourse that according to Kristeva "includes carnivalesque and Menippean discourses as well as the polyphonic novel. In its structures, writing reads another writing, reads itself and constructs itself" (47). Moreover, her essay further depicts how the polyphonic novel practises Menippean discourse,

which has assimilated the carnivalesque tradition. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye traces back the origins of the Menippean satire, also rarely called the Varronian satire (after a Roman imitator, Varro), which was "allegedly invented by a Greek cynic named Menippus ... The Menippean satire appears to have developed out of the verse satire through the practice of adding prose interludes" (309). Frye suggests an alternative name, the anatomy, after a major English instance of the type, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). The word "anatomy" in the title means a dissection or analysis and expresses the intellectualised approach of Burton's form, which is a massive collage of quotations and commentary upon them. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye says that

> The short form of the Menippean satire is usually a dialogue or colloquy, in which the dramatic interest is in a conflict of ideas rather than of character … sometimes this form expands to full length, and more than two speakers are used: the setting then is usually a 'cena' or symposium. (310)

Such satires are written in prose and constitute a diversified form bound together by a loosely constructed narrative.

A major feature of Menippean discourse is a series of extended dialogues and debates in which a group of loquacious literary people, who have various philosophical points of view, serve to make ridiculous the viewpoints or attitudes they embody by way of the arguments they appeal to. J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) is a postmodern example of Menippean discourse/satire in that Coetzee's latest book is a series of philosophical dialogues bound into a fiction-as-lecture format. It is a self-conscious novel, a Text about other texts which is constructed as well as a multiplicity of texts. Elizabeth Costello, the novel's protagonist, is a sixty-six-year-old fictional novelist from Australia who delivers speeches to the academy or as a one-time entertainer on a cruise ship. *Elizabeth Costello* is written as eight lessons; some of these lessons are speeches Costello or others deliver, yet some are responses to what others have written. Keeping in mind Northrop Frye's thoughts about the novel and satire in *Anatomy of Criticism*, one realises that

> The novelist shows his exuberance whether by an exhaustive analysis of human relationships … or of social phenomena … The Menippean satirist, dealing with intellectual themes and attitudes, shows his exuberance in intellectual ways, by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme. (311)

In the case of *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee is the novelist who has created a metacharacter, Costello, who stands as Frye's Menippean satirist engaged in giving talks and undermining Western logocentric philosophies. Originally presented as a series of generic lectures –

Costello, like Coetzee, is addressing an audience – the novel of eight lessons incorporates respondents to, or critics of, Costello/Coetzee. Derek Attridge maintains that, to some extent, Coetzee is writing out of his own preoccupations as a famous writer because "it is presumably not for nothing that he and his central character's last names begin with the same letters – even if the counter-figure of her son is given Coetzee's first name" (201). Coetzee and Costello have something else in common: they are both academic lecturers. In fact, Coetzee has read aloud most of the book's lessons – this means that Costello's moral arguments are speeches by Coetzee given at actual universities, but appear in *Elizabeth Costello* as edited versions now attributed to the protagonist. She is an important chess piece in a series of narratives that in their very sparseness achieve the focused tension of philosophical dialogues.

J. M. Coetzee is the first and most prominent South African author to write overtly self-conscious fictions drawing explicitly on international postmodernism. He has brought in contemporary Western concerns which accentuate textuality to a degree that is not common in the South African literary tradition. Coetzee's career has not followed an easy path because he has had to challenge the realist conventions which abound in the South African novel, and he has written about the broad field of postcolonialism from a white writer's position. Coetzee has been concerned with moral issues that include apartheid, race relations to human rights, animal rights, and social injustice. Apart from his eight books of fiction, Coetzee has also distinguished himself in translations and in his nonfiction writings. He has been granted several prestigious literary awards, including the Man Booker Prize twice, the Prix Fémina Étranger (1985), the Commonwealth Writers Prize (2000) and lately the Swedish Academy awarded him with the Nobel Prize in Literature (2003).

When Coetzee received the Nobel Prize, he drew on the fiction-as-lecture format again because his obligatory address in Stockholm took the form of a story, though without the novelistic opening of the Costello pieces. "He and His Man" begins with a quotation from *Robinson Crusoe*, which deceives the audience and the reader into supposing that the title refers to Crusoe and Friday, but then it rushes into a report about a report: "Boston, on the coast of Lincolnshire, is a handsome town, writes his man. The tallest church steeple in all of England is to be found there; sea-pilots use it to navigate by" (16). It seems Defoe ("his man") is the one doing the reporting and not Friday, so the question that remains is who is receiving the reports. The answer comes as we read about "the parasol he has still with him in his room, standing in a corner, but the parrot that came back with him has passed away. *Poor Robin!* the parrot would squawk from its perch on his shoulders, *Poor Robinson Crusoe! Who shall save poor*

Robin? (17 italics in original). It is Defoe sending reports to Crusoe, however, and this fictional twist becomes even more curious when we discover that the reports, and the man who posts them, are fabrications of Crusoe's, who spends his evenings in Bristol inventing these fictions:

> In the evening by candlelight he will take out his papers and sharpen his quills and write a page or two of his man, the man who sends report of the duckoys of Lincolnshire, and of the great engine of death in Halifax … and of numbers of other things. Every place he goes he sends report of, that is his first business, this busy man of his. (18)

Nevertheless, the man seems to become progressively more detached from his hypothetical creator, and "He and His Man" ends with a fantasy, Crusoe's but presumably Coetzee's as well, wherein "he" and "his man" come across one another, on different ships in a rough, stormy sea, and they are too busy even to wave.

On the same day the Nobel laureate was announced, Ariel Dorfman, Chilean novelist, playwright, and a friend of Coetzee, commented in a live interview broadcast on the *Jim Lehrer News Hour* from New York on the importance of Coetzee's work. Dorfman highlighted that the essential quality which stands out in Coetzee's writing is that of exposing the human contemporary condition. He remarked: "[Coetzee] explores the very bleak landscape of the human soul in our times … He doesn't lie about the human condition. He doesn't lie about his characters. He goes to the depth of what we are as human beings: Men, women, beggars, princes" (Dorfman). Most critics agree that Coetzee is a superb literary craftsman, a real writer's writer due to his innovative and inventive narrative techniques:

> Every one of his sentences is extraordinarily constructed. It creates a whole world there. It's this relationship of how sophisticated he is. Yet at the same time these are very simple or deceptively simple stories that he's telling. He goes deeper and deeper. He just takes away every layer and shows us … the different forms of the human soul. (Dorfman)

History has affected Coetzee's writing in many ways because he has lived through the trauma and drama of recent circumstances in South Africa. He was overcome by the situation of apartheid and injustice that he sees has torn the land. Ariel Dorfman expressed the idea that Coetzee is very much interested in the marginal and outsiders, because where he lived black South Africans were excluded from humanity. In the interview he stated: "I mean the problems of death-and-life issues, right and wrong, make him constantly look at this landscape around him and see people in the most difficult situations, show them all their flaws and yet rising in some sense to find their humanity in the midst of all this" (Dorfman).

Nevertheless, Coetzee does not view himself as a public figure, and this reflects his deliberate elusiveness and how interviewers fail to get straight answers to their questions. The

author's public personality strikingly resembles his elusive novel writing and its discursive methods. In an article published in *World Literature Today* Kristjana Gunnars argues that

> J. M. Coetzee's fiction strips bare the veneer that protects us, and it ventures unflinchingly into territory of mind and experience most of us are afraid to face … he writes with a sparseness and reticence that keep his work from being overtaxed and overwrought. He treats human pain and weakness with respect and refrains from judgment … every work of his explores important sociopolitical issues and their psychological impact … he reaches for the limits of human endurance. (11)

Coetzee's subject matter is often shown in a historical context, reinforcing the notion that embodiment is fundamental, and he reveals how ambiguous and contradictory thought is when he unveils the minds of his characters. In this sense, in her article Gunnars holds that "at this moment in history, it seems especially important to be aware of how complicated all issues are – and how history and the past do not merely disappear with time" (12). Coetzee's narrative interest is bound to situations in which the distinction between right and wrong appears plain, but ultimately it serves no productive purpose within his fiction because it is in exploring weaknesses and defeat that Coetzee depicts humankind. His characters accept and live out their life choices, and therefore, his writing is defined as dealing with maturity.

Coetzee hardly ever gives interviews or press conferences, but he made an exception for David Attwell after the announcement of the Nobel Prize, and in December 2003, *Dagens Nyheter* published the correspondence between the two. Attwell, along with Coetzee, delves into the issue of literary influences and his great European fiction models such as Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Samuel Beckett, who are all broadly existentialist writers. Coetzee affirms that "the writers who have the deepest influence on one are those one reads in one's more impressionable, early life, and often it is the more youthful works of those writers that leave the deepest imprint" (*Dagens Nyheter* interview). He admits to the influences of these works of literature, and however strong they might be, they do not constitute the overbearing authority, which "is mediated through the whole of the culture rather than immediately through imitation" (*Dagens Nyheter* interview). A writer's personal and lived canon is a relationship and cross-reference of formative influences and ideas attained while reading others, so in one's canon "one does find a style of response to experience – or … ways of confirming one's responses to experience" (*Dagens Nyheter* interview). Despite Coetzee's nationality, his lived experience and intellectual canon are clearly European rather than African, and furthermore, he represents a generation in South Africa that is marked by apartheid. Moreover, Coetzee has tried to overcome the close relationship between his

personal canon and the history of oppression in South Africa, in his life writing, since he believes it is "more productive to live out the question than to try to answer it in abstract terms. When I say I have 'lived out' the question I mean I have lived it out not only in day to day life but in my fiction as well" (*Dagens Nyheter* interview). Hence, it seems that in Coetzean terms fiction writing – fantasising and storytelling - is not founded on abstract thought, given that finally the intellect alone will prove itself insufficient.

During the interview, Coetzee proposed a version of a definition of intertextuality when he spoke about his formative influences, modernism and Beckett as he asserted, "the history of the arts is a history of unceasing cross-fertilization across fences and boundaries" (*Dagens Nyheter* interview). In *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee is addressing the predicament of the artist in the postmodern age, when all certainties seem to have gone and when the "word-mirror" (19) is in pieces. Between the lectures, there are some intriguing scenes of human interaction, but these become marginal when compared to the discussions of ideas that permeate the book because many of the characters become ciphers. The novel ultimately deals with a writer's abstract reflections on the art of writing and therefore elucidates the readers via its overt metafictional superstructure. In order to argue on behalf of the arts, emotion over rationality, and imagination over thought, Coetzee uses Elizabeth Costello - this means fiction over conventional argumentation - to demonstrate his contentions are achievable through the literary.

Influential European classics and other intertexts accordingly do not cease to play a part in *Elizabeth Costello* right up to the last pages. The novel's blatant intertextuality culminates in the "Postscript" to the volume, the "Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon." Signing the letter "Elizabeth C," and dating it 1603, Costello imagines herself as wife to Lord Chandos. Her piece is based on Hugo von Hofmannsthal's famous *The Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon* (1902), which some critics affirm is an anti-Enlightenment document that also constitutes a founding text for modernism. In Hofmannsthal's fictional text, Lord Chandos, an imaginary seventeenth-century writer, corresponds with Bacon to explain and apologises for his "complete abandonment of literary activity" (Hofmannsthal). The imaginary seventeenth-century writer is protesting against scientific abstractions, and asking what place there is for poetry in a world of science. Lord Chandos argues that there is a need for a new language, closer to nature. Yet he can find no language for the revelations he gets from ordinary things and animals leaving him thus in a state of apathy and hopelessness unlike the sentiments in his earlier lyric poetry:

> To a person susceptible to such ideas, it might appear a well-designed plan of divine Providence that my mind should fall from such a state of inflated arrogance into this extreme of despondency and feebleness which is now the permanent condition of my inner self … My case, in short, is this: I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently. (Hofmannsthal)

In Coetzee's text, Elizabeth Chandos, having seen her husband's letter, writes to assure Bacon that Chandos is not mad – "I fear you may think my husband wrote in a fit of madness, a fit that by now may have passed" (*Elizabeth Costello* 227) and pleads to Bacon: "Save me, dear Sir, save my husband! Write! Tell him the time is not yet come" (229), hoping his words will convince Chandos otherwise.

Coetzee writes at the beginning of *Elizabeth Costello* that "the notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal" (9 italics in original), and it is this very ambition that Lord Chandos had once embraced. He says of the characters he wanted to use in his literary works: "I wanted to decipher the fables, the mythical tales bequeathed to us by the Ancients … I craved to enter these naked, glistening bodies, these sirens and dryads, this Narcissus and Proteus, Perseus and Actaeon. I longed to disappear in them and talk out of them with tongues" (Hofmannsthal). For Chandos, a man who once harboured great literary ambitions, the words literally failed him. Hofmannsthal's Chandos letter speaks of the extreme states of mind of those who feel themselves embodying an other: "Each of these objects and a thousand others similar … can suddenly, at any moment (which I am utterly powerless to evoke), assume for me a character so exalted and moving that words seem too poor to describe it" (Hofmannsthal). Therefore, there is no language available for this kind of embodiment. In *Elizabeth Costello*, Lady Chandos's letter also positions her in the same sense of crisis as she writes at the limits of language. In the end, she seems to leave the text in a state of self-repudiation by questioning how the literary life does not provide relief for *the* exceptional ones: "*We are not meant to live thus*. Only for *extreme souls* may it have been intended to live thus, where words give way beneath your feet like rotting boards … There may come a time when such *extreme souls* as I write of may be able to bear their afflictions, but that time is not now" (228-229 italics in original). In light of the discussion about *Elizabeth Costello* and the question what way of life is best for the "extreme souls," Coetzee himself said: "what you call 'the literary life', or any other way of life that provides means of interrogation of our existence – in the case of the writer fantasy, symbolization, storytelling – seems to me a good life – good in the sense of being ethically responsible" (*Dagens Nyheter* interview).

In general, Coetzee's protagonist is concerned with humanity, and the ethics and the process involved in fiction writing. Throughout *Elizabeth Costello,* she staunchly defends the literary and her works in particular against the overrated scientific studies that seem to permeate the academy at the present. Costello epitomises the so-called "extreme soul" Lady Chandos writes about in the "Postscript" because she withstands the afflictions and overcomes despondency, unlike her fictional husband and Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, by lecturing around the world in favour of her literary vocation. Her ordeal rests on her attempts to advocate her ideas and pursue her arguments notwithstanding the intellectual narrowness of most of her listeners, readers, and even closest family. Costello's intellectual exploration into various research fields encompasses wide-ranging issues such as animal rights, African oral traditions and the humanities in Africa, and the problems of representation and their implications for literary realism. The novel has an overtly metafictional structure, and in order for it to work as a coherent narrative whole, it relies on Costello's partly transcribed speeches as well as the other characters who embody ideas and philosophical standpoints.

2. Philosophical concerns with honesty in novels

Novelists have always found it relatively easy to include in their works theories and opinions about society, the universe, ethical values, and other ideas. Novels in which overt intellectual exploration is the main aim are usually denominated philosophical novels. These texts strive to confront the so-called eternal questions about knowledge, humanity's place in the universe, or the value of human effort. In an enlightening essay called "Philosophical Fictions," Peregrine Horden affirms

> You can … put anything you like in the novel. You can put philosophers and philosophies in it. You may even attempt to philosophize with it: offering, by means of explicit argument or subtle presentation, a genuine contribution to philosophy rather than a mere reflection of existing philosophical concerns. (iv)

Whereas most philosophical essays are concerned with abstract ideas, the focal point for the philosophical novel is the consequence of ideas on ordinary lives. For instance, Czech writer Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) is a philosophical novel about the challenges which face the individual in the modern world. Kafka chooses to filter issues through the life of an ordinary man, Joseph K, a conscientious bureaucrat, who is placed under arrest without understanding the reasons. K searches for the solution to his situation by questioning those whom he

considers witnesses and accomplices, yet these encounters only serve to convict him of the unnamed crime. In one scene, K must locate the Court in the recesses of a tenement, which is a maze crowded with strangers who seem to recognise him. His wanderings symbolise that he is lost and does not know how to escape from his problems. Like Franz Kafka, one could name a few more writers, of the modernist canon or not, who use the literary techniques of debate and symbolism. For the time being, the reference to Kafka's novel is appropriate since his influence in J. M. Coetzee's work is unmistakable and Coetzee openly acknowledges it. Moreover, the name Michael K, who is the protagonist in Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), is a direct allusion to Joseph K, and both novels share the theme of alienation.

Some critics and theorists contend that modernism was the one great literary marker when one deals with many of the most notable philosophical novels. With the advent of postmodernity the problem of philosophical honesty has been addressed in order to comprehend the differences between the modernist and the postmodern perspectives. The novel of ideas is one of the most predominant contemporary literary forms. Timothy Bewes's essay "What is 'Philosophical Honesty' in Postmodern Literature?" claims that "the novel of ideas represents … the commodification or the reification – inadvertant, inevitable, or otherwise – of the philosophical novel" (427). Bewes further describes how the self-conscious and reflective attributes of postmodernism foster "the 'novel of ideas' [which] is the product of a highly reflective age. In this sense it is a characteristic form of postmodernity – far more so that the 'philosophical novel', which is an archetypally modern form" (432). However, Bewes believes the novel of ideas is not a deterioration of the philosophical novel; rather, the only form philosophical honesty can assume in postmodern literature is that of a novel of ideas. If the writer is engaged in performing a mechanical task only to create a work for the reader-consumer market, then s/he has failed philosophical honesty completely. Therefore, one can use the concepts of philosophical novel or novel of ideas analogously only when as readers one notices

> …the absence of authorial *predetermination* or ulterior motives. The philosophical novel should be a *meditation* which engages the reader philosophically, in which the author and reader are embarked upon a joint enterprise … the author writes … from a position that is not elevated above the reader, but one in which the reader meets the author halfway. (428 italics in original)

From the beginning of *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee stands behind his novel, but he does not enter into it as an authoritative voice; he and the reader explore the lessons whose emphasis is very obviously on ideas.

Most chapters (or lessons) in *Elizabeth Costello* are a byplay of the two spheres which make up Costello's life: her personality and her public image. Some chapters are devoted almost entirely to the speeches she gives to the academy, though the narrator chooses to abridge some of them. Costello's talks at the universities are based, like any serious public literary address, on the seminal art of essay writing. Her so-called lessons seem to follow the very quintessential features of essays, whose purpose is to discuss an issue or express a point of view on any subject in a short composition in prose. Alina C. Hunt's views on the essay are expressed in her "Philosophical Essay," in which she holds that

> Philosophy has been closely linked to the essay since the genre's inception. Both of the essay's founding fathers, Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon, attempted to endow it with a philosophical status … both conceived of the essay as fundamentally philosophical in nature. (656-657)

The Greek Plutarch and the Romans Cicero and Seneca wrote essays before the genre was given what became its standard name by Montaigne's *Essais* (1580, 1588). The term "essay" not only designates a literary composition, but also signifies the word's original meaning of "attempt" or "trial." Francis Bacon, late in the sixteenth century, inaugurated the English use of the term. Hunt argues that in the twentieth century, "the philosophical essay has moved further away from ideas of the self, and become more critical and more self-conscious" (657). It seems that the essay has assumed a postmodern dimension now that it is considered

> …inherently a pluralistic and interdisciplinary genre. At once art and criticism, literature and philosophy, imagination and reason, its task is not to stay within well-chartered boundaries, nor to shuttle back and forth across these boundaries, but rather to reflect on and to challenge them. (658)

Many postmodern writings blend literary genres and cultural and stylistic levels that they resist classification according to traditional literary rubrics. If the undertaking of postmodernism is to subvert conventionality and presupposition then the philosophical essay works in the same sense, since its "fragmentary nature … serves to decenter the self, so that the subject may experience the object without dominating it" (657).

In philosophical novels, characters are every so often used to voice ideas and viewpoints, and they are as much spokespersons for theories and positions as they are independent figures. However, the philosophical novel differs from purely philosophical works because it embodies concepts in human personality and directs attention to the characters who have opinions rather than just to the positions themselves. From the onset, the

narrator in *Elizabeth Costello* accentuates the determining role of embodiment by analysing its position within the realistic canon:

> Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things … realism is driven to invent situations … in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal. (9 italics in original)

At this point the reader acknowledges that the narrator is an omniscient narrator who might be labelled as intrusive when, on varied occasions, expresses views about life in general. In the novel's first lesson, 'Realism', Costello is to receive the Stowe Award, "one of the larger literary prizes in the United States" (2), and her son John accompanies her. The centrepiece of the lesson is Costello's acceptance speech, entitled 'What is Realism?' Literary critics apply the term realism in two different ways. Firstly, it is used to identify a movement in the writing of novels during the nineteenth century, and secondly, to designate a recurrent mode, in various epochs and literary forms, of representing human life and experience in literature. Realism is said to represent life as it really is. Realistic fiction is written to give the effect that it epitomises life and the social world as it seems to the ordinary reader. In his *Recent Theories of Narrative*, Wallace Martin writes that a "more polemical way to challenge the claims of realists is to argue that realism is simply one convention among others" (63). Some theorists draw the conclusion that, since all literary representations are constituted by arbitrary conventions, there are no valid grounds for holding one kind of fiction to be more realistic than another. "In the context of reading," Martin maintains, "'realism' appears to be that broad area of narrative without any identifiable conventions" (58).

The widespread idea that realism is an outmoded aesthetic movement has become a critical commonplace. For some time now criticism has vouched that the realistic novel as a serious literary vehicle is on its deathbed, encouraging readers to look outside realism for a better understanding of the world. Raymond Tallis asserts in his *In Defence of Realism* that

> … realism has not yet begun to exhaust its possibilities. If it seems to have done so, this is only because of a persistent tendency to confuse the *aims* of realism with certain techniques used to achieve those aims – techniques developed largely by the great nineteenth-century novelists. (3 italics in original)

Confusing realism with its historical phases – usually the eighteen hundreds – only strengthens the negative view about realism, seeing as contemporary readership objects to the supposedly simplistic use of techniques pioneered by nineteenth-century realists. The realist novel first

developed in the nineteenth-century and is the form one associates with the works of writers such as Austen, Balzac, George Eliot and Tolstoy. Tallis speaks of a downgrading of realism because "as the use of these techniques over the subsequent century or so has become less critical, less skilled, and less conscious, so a particular type of realism has become degenerate" (195-6). By defending realism Raymond Tallis does not necessarily endorse what he calls the "arrière garde," nor does he imply an opposition to experimentation which the present and the future require of literature. The narrative modes, characters and themes that were central to nineteenth-century realists may be completely abandoned by an ensuing modern realism. Tallis believes realism can occupy its place in contemporary literature and beside the postmodern novel even though "some critics think of realism as philosophically incurious and naive … A realistic novel can be 'an adventure of ideas' as much as an anti-realist one" (197). Traditionally writers, for several reasons, have been interested in writing from the viewpoint of one of the participants in the narrated events, from within the space of the fiction. For one thing, this technique enhances the dramatic force because the story is told by someone caught up in the events and the reader identifies her/himself with the narrator. Thus, Tallis mentions that "realistic fiction is capable of being the highest expression of the fundamental task of consciousness – that of imagining what is actually *there*" (211 italics in original).

Anti-realistic fiction is to blame for the critical approach to and debate over the techniques, habits and assumptions of realism that writers and critics have mused on for some decades. Tallis describes anti-realism as "an invaluable critique of realism" (213) which has the effect of pushing for a more sophisticated realism, "a means of deepening it, sharpening it, and so assisting it in its task of approximation reality" (215). The critique which developed against realism has made writers more aware of the difficulties to be overcome and the possibilities to be exploited so that realism may reclaim its place. "The great realistic novel," Tallis holds, "is unsleepingly aware of the complexity of ideas and the uncombed nature of reality, of the provisionality and incompleteness of the sense we make of the world" (214). Realistic fiction links the small facts of life with larger historical forces that enclose us, and mediates the truths of abstract thought with the truths of daily life. After all, realism is an aesthetic mode which broke with the classical demands of art to show life as it should be in order to show life "as it is." Attentively reading a book turns out to be "a response to an invitation to draw part of what we know; or to use what we know to imagine into what we don't" (Tallis 212). Hence, realism remains central, it has overtly superseded its outmoded labels of the nineteenth century, and it is striving to take up the challenge of all literary art

seriously and directly. One cannot mistake anti-realism for a series of "isms" or flourishing but blurred aesthetic modes, nor should it be seen as setting realism aside. Classic realism has been denounced as the crudest form of the readerly text, and its conventions subverted and parodied by the modern novel, the new novel and postmodern novel. The form nonetheless has shown remarkable resiliency. Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality" or "verisimilitude," realism is a literary technique practised by many schools of writing. Naturally, realism can never fully offer up the world in all its complexity and plenitude so that its verisimilitude is an effect accomplished through the deployment of certain literary and ideological conventions which have a kind of truth value as understood by reading conventions. The use of a omniscient narrator who gives the reader access to a character's thoughts, motivations and feelings, for instance, is a formalised principle that produces a sense of psychological depth. The characters seem to have lives independent of the text itself but, of course, they do not. The sense that they do is achieved by the fact that both the author and the reader share these codes of the real. The attempt, however, to render life as it is, to use language as a kind of undistorting mirror of, or perfectly transparent window to, the "real" is fraught with contradictions. Coetzee's protagonist in *Elizabeth Costello* argues this point bluntly as she says that comprehending our surroundings, the objects and spaces described realistically, no longer depends on "look[ing] in the word-mirror of the text" (19).

3. Subversion and intertextuality: Two approaches to 'Realism' in Elizabeth Costello

Realism refers to a certain reading experience regardless of when the text was produced. Nonetheless, over time, 'realism' and 'the novel' have often been rated as synonymous terms, and according to Martin, "the overwhelming dominance of realistic narrative since the middle of the nineteenth century has led some novelists … to feel that they must explain or defend their use of other modes" (63). This is obvious even more so in contemporary literature when Pam Morris points out that "with the full development of the postmodern condition, the aesthetic and cognitive bankruptcy of realism is confirmed" (37). A repeated critique of realism is the accusation that its writing supports conservatism and Morris alleges artists and intellectuals, "to escape immersion in this materiality … seek the spaciousness of an uncircumscribed playfulness" (41). Moreover, absolute playfulness can only be promoted by the author and the critical reader. This emphasis on play and textuality draws

upon Roland Barthes's essay "From Work to Text," in which he distinguishes reading as consumption from reading as *playing* with the text. For Barthes,

> 'Playing' must be understood here in all its polysemy: the text itself *plays* (like a door, like a machine with 'play') and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which re-produces it, but, in order that that practice not be reduced to a passive, inner *mimesis* … also playing the Text in the musical sense of the term. (290)

The days when playing and listening to music were by no means differentiated activities, the reading process depended likewise almost entirely on the author-father paradigm. Today the performer of music is also "called on to be in some sort the co-author of the score, completing it rather that giving it 'expression'. The Text is very much a score of this new kind: it asks of the reader a practical collaboration" (Barthes 291). Literary postmodernism practises writing as an infinite play of meanings instead of using language as a means for expressing authorial truths or an objective reality. Deconstructive theories have produced a new understanding of the world, and through postmodern aesthetics, have deposed realism in some literary environments in that "realist novels are accused of colluding with functional reason to produce philistine readerly narratives" (Morris 37).

Pam Morris's claims follow up on the belief that realistic novels have been founded on logocentrism. The originator and namer of logocentrism was the French thinker Jacques Derrida, whose attempt a deconstruction of the tradition of Western thought. Derrida's reiterated theses are that not only all Western philosophies and theories of language, but all Western uses of language, are logocentric. That is, they are centred on a 'logos' (which in Greek meant both 'word' and 'rationality'). Morris writes that Derrida shows

> … how speech has been consistently valued as more authentic than writing. This is because the meaning and truth of speech is held to be more immediately in touch with an origination thought or intention than writing is. Truth, in Western philosophy, has always been understood to be guaranteed by presence: of an author, or a mind, or God. (34)

Hence, this "underpins an ideal of Truth as whole and unitary, and of meaning as fixed, stable and definitive" (Morris 35). One should bear in mind in this context that the feasibility of language is based on difference as explained by semiotics. Pam Morris describes further on: "Derrida claims that a signifier cannot be arrested in a single meaning that is present in the mind. Signifiers refer only to other signifiers in an unstoppable motion. Thus language must be understood as a signifying practice in which meaning is constantly deferred" (35). Derrida coins the term *différance*, in which he uses the spelling "-ance" instead of "-ence" to indicate a fusion of two senses of the French verb "différer": to be different, and to defer. On the one

hand, this double sense points to the fact that a text has a significance which derives from its difference. On the other hand, interpreting the meaning of the text is endlessly deferred since its significance can never remain fixed within logos.

Elizabeth Costello's lessons have serious implications for the writer's role. Every episode in the novel acts out the opposition between embodiment and reason. In *Elizabeth Costello* J. M. Coetzee has opposed embodiment – fullness or the sensation of being – over against rational thought. The overbearing presence of realistic fiction has been forever shattered as Costello herself states:

> There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe that when the text said, 'On the table stood a glass of water, ' there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them … the word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems. (19)

One is left wondering why Costello has chosen to speak about literary history at her award ceremony. The relevant question seems to be "why such a grim chapter in literary history? Realism: no one in this place wanted to hear about realism" (31), and it is Costello's son who asks it. Her lecture on realism, like all the following lectures in the novel, is not as straightforward and linear as Costello's audiences would expect from a world renowned author. Apart from some introductory sentences about literary recognition, the creative process of writing, and the briefness of fame, the high point of Costello's talk is her view on Franz Kafka's short story "A Report for an Academy" (1919). The ape Red Peter is summoned to deliver a speech to the academy about his previous existence as an ape. Red Peter's report is done in the form of a monologue by the ape himself. In "A Report for an Academy" Red Peter proves he has become proficient in the manners and conventions of learned society:

> Hands in my trouser pockets, wine bottle on the table, I half lie, half sit in my rocking-chair and look out of the window. If I have visitors I receive them in the proper fashion … if I ring [my manager] comes in and listens to what I have to say … Waiting for me when I get back late from banquets, scientific societies, or cosy at-homes is a small, semi-trained female chimpanzee. (228)

Red Peter further demonstrates he can speak his audience's language: "The beams of knowledge permeating the waking brain from all sides … By dint of exertions … I acquired the average education of a European" (227). Like his female mate Red Peter is a trained performer, but he admits he enjoys his success. Ironically enough his mate "has that mad look of the confused trained animal in her eye; only I can see it, and I cannot stand it" (228).

When referring to Kafka's story about Red Peter Costello contends that the monologue might not be by a *real* ape, the speaker may be simply a human being or a human being pretending to be an ape. Costello's reasoning leads one back to the unbendable nature of realistic texts. In the case of Kafka's story, and contrary to realism, Costello asserts that "we don't know and will never know, with certainty, what is really going on in this story … There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were. Now we are just performers speaking our parts" (19). She too is a performer who is on display before the academy; she is being asked to play her part as an educated woman and lecture them on the creative process and authorship. Costello's approach to "What is Realism?" does not conform to the usual established conventions speakers follow when giving public talks. But owing to her creative streak and poetic vain as novelist she is allowed some liberties in her writings, and even the so-called academic lessons, to include the intertextual references and analogies she chooses to illustrate her viewpoints. Astutely using Franz Kafka's story Costello has brilliantly cleaved to the title of her speech, notwithstanding the audience's nonplussed response that her writerly skills have compelled her to digress. The story about Red Peter and Costello's opinions on authorship resound throughout the other events of Lesson 1. The key issue of embodiment mentioned by the narrator is resumed again in the words on Elizabeth Costello who, after much persistence from her son John, tells him that "Kafka's ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you" (32). Completion of meaning only occurs when the reader has understood the connection between the protagonist's lecture, which lies within the chapter, and the comments of the narrator and the characters, which encircle the acceptance speech.

The narrative voice of *Elizabeth Costello* is another enigmatic piece in Coetzee's disquieting book. The narrator opens the novel and creates his own personality as a kind of literary spectator while debating the difficulties of creating a narrative: "There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge" (1). The narrator spots the dilemma and when reading the second paragraph it has been solved with a simple assertion: "Let us assume that … it is done" (1). Only then is the reader prepared to move from "nowhere" and cross over to "the far territory, where we want to be" (1). In addition, the narrator introduces Elizabeth Costello by chronicling her complete biography. She is a fictional novelist from Australia whose reputation has fostered around her a critical industry. She is near the end of her life, she has two grown children and she has been

married twice. Through the whole of the novel the narrative voice makes its comments and asides reiterating the fact that one is in the presence of a self-conscious narrator who, by means of the opening sentences, engenders a self-reflexive novel. A self-reflexive novel, or an involuted novel, incorporates into its narration reference to the process of composing the fictional story itself.

In Lesson 1, though, the narrative voice is more diligent in that it intervenes deliberately on various occasions to break the narrative flow. The narrator overtly omits sections in the performance of the characters in the plot: "There is a scene in the restaurant, mainly dialogue, which we will skip. We resume back at the hotel" (7); "We skip to the evening, to the main event, the presentation of the award" (15). Interestingly it is during these instances that the text's narratee is explicitly referred to, seeing as the narrator always resorts to the pronoun 'we'. As mentioned earlier, Costello's lectures are not transcribed word for word and it is the narrator who chooses to abridge her talks: "Elizabeth Costello proceeds to reflect on the transience of fame. We skip ahead" (17). The narrative agent justifies the omissions in the representation of the story by acknowledging that

> It is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often, since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction. (16)

The narrator's words again reflect a self-conscious position towards the narrative and the explanation provided acts out the reflectiveness inherent in the present fiction writing process. Thus, the narrator believes that "breaking into the dream draws attention to the constructedness of the story, and plays havoc with the realist illusion … The skips are not part of the text, they are part of the performance" (16). Only once does the narrator omit a section in the text itself, which happens when John mulls over recent events: "We skip ahead again, a skip this time in the text rather than in the performance" (24). These other overt intrusions of the narrator in the text from this line forward are called 'gaps'. The most obvious instances in *Elizabeth Costello* of attenuating and leaving out unimportant periods of time appear in the first lesson of the book as the narrator signals hiatuses in time and place. Coetzee reveals this literary and narrative style to David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* as he says that:

> The first is that by its nature narrative must create an altered experience of time … For the reader, the experience of time bunching and becoming dense at points of significant action in the story, or thinning out and skipping or glancing through nonsignificant periods of clock time or calendar time, can be exhilarating … As for writing and the experience of writing, there is a definite thrill of mastery – perhaps even omnipotence. (203-204)

They are manifest breaks in the continuity of the narrative flow. For instance, there is a similar hiatus between time and place in a short number of sentences in the first chapter: "Then they are in the taxi, driving through streets that already have the air of streets about to be forgotten … A gap. They are at the airport, at the gate, waiting for the flight to be called" (31).

As J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* exploits the conventional traits of narratological focalisation and point-of-view, it also exceeds the bounds of commonplace beginnings so important in novels. The novel undermines the deep-rooted characteristics of realistic fiction which had occupied the literary canon ever since its apogee in the nineteenth century and until it was weakened by the modernists. Writers of fiction who choose to reject this aesthetic movement are always implicitly obliged to justify their swerve from the formality of realism. So *Elizabeth Costello* is of course essentially a postmodern novel because it works within traditional practices in order to subvert them just as postmodernism aims at discontinuity, decentring and indeterminacy. In Coetzee's novel, and particularly in Lesson 1, the narrator provides a feeble and literary definition of realism and its usage in fiction predicated on its historical pre-eminence which will clarify its shortcomings. This shrewd clarification the novel wants to announce depends on the protagonist Elizabeth Costello who through her academic lectures elucidates fictitious audiences and lures the reader into the domain of metaphysical questions. Costello's talk on Kafka's Red Peter hinges on the philosophical like the other arguments in the book which address important issues in much the same way. Discussion of these matters occurs in *Elizabeth Costello* due to its dialogic nature; the relationship between lecturer and listener is the appropriate combination for an understanding of the lessons. If one is to include the informed reader to those who are already participating in the plot – narrator, protagonist, characters (including the lecturers), and audiences – then Coetzee's text accomplishes a plurality of meanings in what Roland Barthes describes as 'the stereographic plurality'.

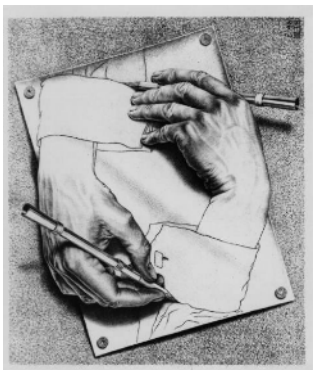
Achieving meaning is furthermore determined by the overlaying intertextualities which permeate throughout *Elizabeth Costello* and which have come to characterise most trends in postmodern literature. Being a scholar of the humanities and a novelist, Costello often resorts to prior canonical texts so as so better argue her points. Intertextuality is fundamental to Costello's lessons just as it turns out to be important in our understanding of literature. Coetzee's novel, like many other novels by fiction writers, embodies the inscription of earlier works in contemporary fiction and dispels the theory that postmodernity draws breath from exhausted literature. Like many theorists in the field of intertextuality and allusional studies

Jonathan Culler maintains that intertextual links are unavoidable and they are central in literature, especially in postmodern texts. He expresses his viewpoints clearly when stating that

> Intertextuality is the family archive; when one explores it one stays wholly within the traditional canon of major poets. The text is an intertextual construct, comprehensible only in terms of other texts which it prolongs, completes, transforms, and sublimates. (108)

A critical reader or an archaeologist of the text, as perceived by Udo Hebel, realises the varied meanings intended in literature when s/he relates a literary work to a whole series of other works, works which are constituents of a large woven fabric that when separated falls apart.

Self-reflexive tendencies in novels



1. Metafictional novels

Recent developments in literature and other arts considered through the lens of postmodernism make heavy use of various types of self-conscious statement. Poststructural thought and criticism which underlie postmodernism oppose inherited ways of thinking in all areas of knowledge. That is, they expressly undertake to destabilise, and in many cases to subvert and undermine what they label as the foundational assumptions in traditional modes of discourse in Western civilisation. This questioning of established ways of thought includes literary criticism. Postmodern literature values self-reflexivity and challenges self-consciously ideology. The recurring motifs of intertextualities and parody are familiar traits in postmodern writings whose authors interrogate the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions that are "always already" in place. While self-reflexivity is latent in many other types of fictional texts, it often becomes the prevailing subject of postmodern fiction.

Fiction's self-reflexive tendency has been styled "metafiction," a term which seems to have originated in an essay by the American critic and novelist William H. Gass entitled "Fiction and the Figures of Life" (1970). Patricia Waugh provides a comprehensive definition by describing metafiction as

> fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not lonely examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside literary fictional text. (2)

Metafictional novels and stories are pieces of fiction which call attention to their functional status and their compositional procedures. Waugh argues that metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in all novels, but it has become particularly prominent in the fiction of the late twentieth century. Accordingly, Waugh maintains that "metafiction is a mode of writing within a broader cultural movement often referred to as post-modernism" (21). Nevertheless, theorists hold that the practice of metafiction is old – metafictional techniques are traceable to older and classic literary works. Self-reflexivity can be observed in such widely differing texts as Miguel Cervantes' fifteenth-century novel, *Don Quixote*; Hamlet's references to stage acting in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1600); and in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Austen's great comedy of female enlightenment published posthumously begins with a resounding no: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland" (1); "She never could learn or understand any thing" (2); "She had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper" (2). On *Northanger Abbey* Terry

Castle writes that "if Catherine, Austen's anti-heroine, is defined by a series of 'no's', 'neither's', and 'nor's', the story Austen tells about her is also fraught with negatives" (vii). In telling a story filled with negation, Jane Austen was, according to Castle, "making a statement about her own art – about what it would *not* be, what it would *not* describe, what it would *not* endorse" (x). Austen's novel can thus be related to metafiction and to the parodic trend of postmodernism which is especially striking in contemporary literature in this case owing to its burlesque of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel. *Northanger Abbey* is celebrated for its send-up of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which Castle considers was the most widely read novel in Europe by the time Jane Austen started writing and publishing. Austen's novel disparaged one of the prized symbols of late eighteenth-century popular culture "by daring to parody the most famous female novelist of the age … Austen performed an essential act of artistic self-individuation" (Castle xi). Parody achieves its effect through imitating of the form and style of a literary work and then deflating it to a low or comic level. Terry Castle describes the way Austen frequently

> sets up a superficial resemblance between her own fiction and Radcliffe's only to revoke it with a simple yet devastation shift in context … *Udolpho's* romantic situations are reconstituted – but in the comically *un*romantic … counties of England. By the method of ironic dislocation, Austen both acknowledged her powerful precursor and signalled her separation from her: to parody Radcliffe was also to escape her. (xi)

By way of the critical burlesque, Jane Austen clearly points out the sort of novel writing she was attempting to avoid and further manifests her preference for episodes of ordinary life.

Throughout *Northanger Abbey,* the heroine is deeply immersed in romantic fiction to the point of valuing literature over life. Austen, like others before her, exposes of privileging art over lived experience, and her satire is not *Udolpho* but of Catherine Morland, who shapes her vision of life according to what she has read. As Catherine and Henry Tilney are walking around Beechen Cliff, she says:

> 'I never look at it,' said Catherine, as they walked along the side of the river, 'without thinking of the south of France.'
>
> 'You have been abroad?' said Henry, a little surprized.
>
> 'Oh! No, I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through, in the "Mysteries of Udolpho".'
>
> 'The person be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure.' (82)

Austen's heroine is unable to distance herself from Radcliffe's scenery as depicted in *Udolpho*, and thus cannot see and admire what is before her. In this sense, Austen's satire acquires a new significance because "the 'no' in *Northanger Abbey*," Terry Castle writes, "is not merely to a kind of literature – the so-called Gothic or sentimental mode – but to a certain conception of the relationship between literature and experience" (xii). Moreover, Castle asserts that Jane Austen was familiar with the writings of English philosopher John Locke whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) examines "the danger of letting the 'false ideas' of poetry and fancy come between one and one's direct apprehension of the world" (Castle xiv).

John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* pertains to that extensive and varied collection of works which characterised the intellectual movement and cultural setting known as the Enlightenment that developed in Western Europe during the seventeenth century and which reached its apogee in the eighteenth. In England the thought and the world outlook of the Enlightenment are most often traced from Francis Bacon through John Locke to late-eighteenth-century thinkers such as William Godwin. Parts of Locke's essay, or at least substantial paraphrases from it, appear in Laurence Sterne's nine-volume novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67). The first reference to Locke's essay occurs when Tristram, Sterne's protagonist and the autobiographer of the book, informs the reader that his book is meant to stand as a history book in the same way that Locke's essay is a history of mental life:

> Pray, Sir, in all the reading which you have ever read, did you ever read such a book as *Locke's* Essay upon the Human Understanding? Don't answer me rashly, because many have read it who understand it not: If either of these is your case, as I write to instruct, I will tell you in three words what the book is. It is a history. A history! of who? what? where? when? … It is a history-book, Sir, (which may possibly recommend it to the world) of what passes in a man's own mind. (77)

In calling his work a history of "what passes in a man's mind," Tristram draws attention to the fact that, in writing his own "life and opinions," he will be portraying mostly a mental life. Ian Watt writes in his article entitled "The Comic Syntax of *Tristram Shandy*" that

> Tristram's voice is by no means an irrational one, but a rational instrument for the revelation of human irrationality. Belonging to the Age of Reason helped Sterne to see and demonstrate that human behavior is not based on reason; in the end Locke taught him, not so much that the human mind is a blank tablet, as that philosophical attempts to transcend ordinary human experience end up in a blank alley. (55)

The comparison to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* might suggest that Tristram's book, however personal it may be, will represent general truths about human nature. The author problematises, through considerations like these, the relationship between a historical account of an individual mind and a philosophical record of human thinking in general.

The comparison to Locke also raises the question of the genre of this text. Sterne's book is considered a novel. *Tristram Shandy* actually falls back on the conventions of a number of genres, if often only to interfere with or deride them. Ultimately, the novel recasts these conventions into a unique structure of its own. Comedy, essay, and satire are all modes the author regularly takes up. He refers to other literary works, and also pronounces his own work's independence from them. The presence of whole documents from various non-literary disciplines contributes likewise to the generic heterogeneity of the novel. Meandering through the history of the town's midwife in the first chapters, Tristram takes the opportunity to satirise the obscure legal language of her licence document: "the good woman was fully invested in the real and corporal possession of her office, together with all its *rights*, *members*, *and appurtenances whatsoever*" (13 italics in original). Christopher Ricks argues that

> The potential arrogance of literature – in its relations to the other arts, to the sciences, to religion, to life … is the serious reason for the wonderfully comic pages that are given to the other intellectual disciplines … and in every case we cannot help reflecting that despite their excesses or absurdities they do embody truthful and essential ways of dealing with life that are not the way of literature. (xx)

Tristram clearly borrows from other writers as in the example of the epigraphs from Horace and Erasmus (305), making Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* modern in a way that much pre-Romantic writing is highly intertextual. It is the protagonist who poses the decisive question about the actual experience of writing and the enduring reliance on precursory texts:

> Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we for ever to be twisting, and untwisting the same rope? for ever in the same track – for ever at the same pace? Shall we be destined to the days of eternity … to be shewing the *relicks of learning*, as monks do the relicks of their saints - without working one – one single miracle with them? (309-310)

Obviously the emphasis on and the existence of intertextuality permeates *Tristram Shandy* in such a way that it is the protagonist's words which best exemplify this argument when he calls his book "this rhapsodical work" (33). In the sense of literary texts, one should understand "rhapsodical" to mean a work consisting of a medley of narratives which are fragmentary or disconnected in style. As Tristram says of his father's book, the *Tristrapaedia*, "my father spun

his, every thread of it, out of his own brain, or reeled and cross-twisted what all other spinners and spinsters have spun before him" (336), so *Tristram Shandy* becomes a site of the intertextual thinking and writing, spinning and unravelling of preceding works.

In his *The Art of Fiction* David Lodge claims "the granddaddy of all metafictional novels was *Tristram Shandy*" (206). Ricks argues that "Sterne's greatness is not simply that he wrote a novel about writing a novel … he gave much of his genius to his invented world … as to the theme of inventing it" (xxvii). Metafiction, therefore, is not a modern creation, but it is a mode many contemporary writers find particularly appealing. Lodge maintains that Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* has been

> … a favourite book of experimental novelists and theorists of the novel in our own century … modernist and postmodernist novelists gave also sought to wean readers from the simple pleasures of story by disrupting and rearranging the chain of temporality and causality on which it traditionally depended. (82)

One of the many ways Laurence Sterne foregrounds the hiatus between art and life that realism seeks to conceal is through the narrator's dialogues with his readers. Another question is whether Sterne's attitude towards Tristram and his creation is one of endorsement or irony. Tristram's frequent addresses to the reader draw us into the novel. David Lodge affirms that "Laurence Sterne, narrating under the disguise of Tristram, plays all kinds of games with the narrator-narratee relationship" (81). In the novel, the reader is imagined variously and flexibly as "Dear Sir," "Madam," "Dear Reader," "Your Worships," among many other forms of direct address. From Tristram's perspective, the narratee is asked to remain open-minded, and to embark on an experimental literary adventure. Christopher Ricks contends that *Tristram Shandy* represents the high point of years of experimentation; an opinion which he shares with Wayne C. Booth, who "in a very important study, has shown that the novels of the 1750s made many attempts at self-conscious narration, with a comical intrusive writer preoccupied by the problems of writing" (xvi). Sterne belonged to an age which was progressively enticed to look on literature critically, and he was writing in a novel form. At the time novels were perceived as the most able "to accomplish literary tasks in some ways more profound, more true and more complete than any literature that had preceded it" (Ricks xix). Sterne combines knowledge, scholarship and book writing.

In his novel, Sterne has altered the orthodox order of events and has construed an exaggerated appearance of disorder, but he nonetheless links the episodes at the end in an interesting way. Moreover, in Sterne's time the fragmentary disorder of aesthetics in art was

already recurrent. In an essay titled "*Tristram Shandy* and the Spatial Imagination," Ian Konigsberg writes that "Sterne makes us more aware of his novel as a novel than most other novelists do, that we are constantly made to consider the form and 'aesthetic laws' of his form" (55). *Tristram Shandy* only pretends to overthrow the literary rules because ultimately the work obeys rigorous conventions notwithstanding its disarray and esoteric ideals. Ian Watt, in his article, states that

> Sterne was a solitary; but toward the end of his life he found a way of talking which created its own society. The members of this society, comprising both the fictional characters in the book, its circle of readers, and its narrator, all have a very special literary quality; their voices are attuned to the endless dialogue within, which is so much more inconsequential … than the public dialogues we can hear going on around us, or that we find recorded in most of literature. (57)

The main dialogue which the protagonist carries out is with the reader. Vast passages of *Tristram Shandy* are taken up not with narrative, but with direct address to the reader, often about matters hardly related to the story at hand. According to Ian Watt "the first need is for Tristram to ensure that his readers never lose themselves so completely in the story that they forget the monologist behind the footlights" (50).

Tristram's story begins *ab Ovo* ("from the egg"), in defiance of the Homeric epic tradition that begins stories *in medias res* and then allows the background to unfold along with the plot. Tristram tells the reader:

> For which cause, right glad I am, that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on tracing every thing in it, as *Horace* says, *ab Ovo*. *Horace*, I know, does not recommend this fashion altogether … for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man's rules that ever lived. (8)

It quickly becomes apparent that the chronology of the story will be more complex and unorthodox than just its *ab Ovo* beginning. Tristram disrupts the narrative flow by presenting events in the wrong order, with essayistic digressions, and disordering the beginnings, middles and ends of his sequences. He goes on to describe his view on the digressiveness of the narrative:

> digressions, incontestably, are the sun-shine; they are the life, the soul of reading; to take them out of this book for instance, you might as well take the book along with them; one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer; he steps forth like a bridegroom, bids All hail; brings in variety, and forbids the appetite to fail. (64)

Moreover, many eighteenth-century authors praised their digressive skills in a similar manner. In one of his trips to the Continent Tristram debates with himself whether he should give a written account of the town of Calais, as many travel writers have done before. He writes as he mocks a fictitious travel writer:

> Now before I quit Calais,' a travel-writer would say, 'it would not be amiss to give some account of it.' Now I think it very much amiss – that a man cannot go quietly through a town, and let it alone … but that he must be turning about and drawing his pen at every kennel he crosses over, merely … for the sake of drawing it. (434)

Tristram parodies the conventions of travel writing and then depicts Calais in such a way as to make it sound identical to any other town. He is more interested in people (fictional ones too) than places. However, he claims to have learned a great deal about human nature as a result of travelling. Laurence Sterne's novel is humorous and satiric, and it weaves together different disciplines like law, history and science, which are, in turn, judged by literature. Ricks asserts, when discussing Sterne and *Tristram Shandy*, that "from one point of view, to the writer nothing matters more than writing. From another, writing is ultimately as nothing compared to living" (xix).

After some time into the book the readers realise that it is imperative to follow Tristram in each new direction of the plot and understand his digressions while trying to grasp his double meanings and allusions. Thus, Robert D. Spector, in "Structure as a Starting Point," asserts that

> Sterne's associational method moves from oddity to expectancy. Repetition allows the reader to recognize that the element of structure represents a way of expressing epistemology, a manner of evaluating the significance of events, and a means of achieving a reality closer to human experience than that achieved by more conventional novelistic treatments of causality. (53)

Tristram deliberately stops the action and calls our attention to the fragmentation and disruption of events as he reveals his anxieties about the innate power of chronological time. Furthermore, Spector avers "the sense of randomness and accident, the role of chance, the principles of absurdity, the confusions in communication, the authorial tone and direction … description of a novel whose intention is to create a fictional world that parallels the realities of experience" (50).

After its maturation over decades and centuries of literary production, metafiction has attained more prominence in contemporary fiction. Metafiction has only been popularised since the second half of the twentieth century when a growing class of novels departed from

realism and foregrounded the role of the author and reader in the creative process. In *The Unresolvable Plot* Elizabeth Dipple argues that by the mid-1980s metafictional techniques were deemed normative in characterising contemporary experimentation. She maintains that "metafiction takes the reader's sophistication and complete absorption of genres from the past for granted; so that as a mode it builds ironically on top of the experienced literature of the past" (9). This self-reflexive tendency undermines the credibility of more orthodox fiction by manipulating it but still referring to genres the reader recognises. Most theorists agree that metafiction cannot be classified as a genre nor as the definitive mode of postmodern fiction. They contend that metafiction display "a self-reflexivity prompted by the author's awareness of the theory underlying the construction of the fictional works" (Waugh 2), without separating contemporary texts from earlier works which contain similar techniques.

The academic novel of the mid-twentieth century moved to escape its label of minor genre within the literary genres via fictional works, which are also partly metatextual. Along with its metatextual impulses, *Elizabeth Costello* also belongs to the sub-genre of the academic novel. The acknowledged classics of the academic novel are Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) and Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), one from England and the other from the United States. In Jarrell's novel there is a first-person narrator, who is a poet with a teaching position and a wife. Most of the book is effectively in an omniscient third-person, privy to the characters' dreams or lack of them. Jarrell has chosen to dispense almost entirely with the plot, creating instead a series of linked character-studies organised into unforced flashbacks. Gertrude Johnson is the book's strongest character, and also its most problematic. Jarrell clearly uses her as a ploy, saying through her mouth things that people are inclined to suppress in everyday life, much like Elizabeth Costello is for Coetzee, staunchly upholding uncommonness and striving for controversy. A couple of chapters in Jarrell's book are late-night conversations between characters that turn out to be discussions about politics, literature and society, resembling the lectures and critical theory of *Elizabeth Costello.*

In reading *Pictures from an Institution,* one finds certain similarities to Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, apart from the intensity and strength that are common to both central characters. In Jarrell's book one of the characters claims that "writers want their sites marked" (45), and just as they yearn for recognition the narrator says how Gertrude "was always called 'the most brilliant of our younger novelists'" (201). Costello too longs for appreciation; she wants to have her "place on the shelves of the British Museum, rubbing shoulders with the other Cs,

the great ones" (16). The narrator in *Pictures* gives the reader an overview of Gertrude's fiction, creativity and his insight into morality:

> Her books were a systematic, detailed, and conclusive condemnation of mankind for being stupid and bad; yet if mankind had been clever and good, what would have become of Gertrude? Often morality – to parody another definition - is the last refuge of a moralist. (143)

This remits to the writer's responsibility to mock, lament, and to condemn based on a particular principled relation to existence. For the narrator, Gertrude "made her characters, held them, to the letter of the law" (142) only because, like all proficient authors, she is skilful in depicting the specific and peculiar qualities of her characters that readers would believe in them as recognisable types. However, the narrator lets the reader know that Gertrude is a wilful and opinionated woman and her viewpoints about people in general are not complimentary at all: "Gertrude Johnson could feel no real respect for, no real interest in, anybody who wasn't a writer. For her there were two species: writers and people; and the writers were really people, and the people weren't" (32). Further on in the narrative he goes on to reinforce Gertrude's position by mentioning that "people had always seemed to Gertrude rather like the beasts in *Animal Farm*: all equally detestable, but some more equally detestable than others" (77). *Pictures* is filled with marked quotations, allusions and direct references to literature, philosophical thinkers, the cinematic world and even cultural marks such as *Life* magazine, *Newsweek* and *Time*. There are direct allusions or quotations reaching back from Aristotle to Kafka, Goethe, Molière, Dickens, Twain and Swift, among many others. Like Costello's analytical streak, Gertrude shows an interest in uncovering Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*: "why had Swift liked the Houyhnhnms? Whenever she thought of *Gulliver's Travels* she felt a faint impulse to sweep the last piece off the board, to write an article exposing the Houyhnhnms" (198). Randall Jarrell composed in this way a piece of fiction which brings together metatextual concerns, fiction about fiction writing and the complicated intricacies of life at university.

The spectrum of metafictional techniques is however confusingly wide and it arches across a great variety of literary texts and scholarship. Discriminating against the differences between metafictional characteristics present in postmodern fiction becomes even more complicated because some self-reflexive works also fall under more radical definitions given that some contemporary metafiction can also be called surfiction, antifiction, fabulation, neo-baroque fiction, postmodernist fiction, the introverted novel, irrealism, or the self-begetting novel (Waugh 13). Nonetheless, in her book *Metafiction* Patricia Waugh identifies three broad

types of contemporary metatextual fiction. John Fowles's subversion of the role of the omniscient narrator in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) exemplifies the first type, which Waugh describes as upsetting a particular convention of the novel. Within the second type, she includes works that develop a parody of a specific work or fictional mode. John Fowles's *Mantissa* (1982) for example, she argues, presents a metafictional parody of metafiction. The third type are texts that are less overtly metafictional. Like Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), these works attempt to create alternative linguistic structures or merely to imply old forms by encouraging the reader to draw on his or her knowledge of traditional literary conventions.

In general, metafiction can be said to parody or problematise the structural practices and motifs of the novel itself or of particular forms of that genre. Thus, according to Waugh's analysis of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), the novel draws on a profusion of structural and stylistic parody effects. In the Preface to her novel Lessing points out that

> There is a skeleton, or frame, called *Free Women*, which is a conventional short novel … and which could stand by itself. But it is divided into five sections and separated by stages of the four Notebooks, Black, Red, Yellow and Blue. The Notebooks are kept by Anna Wulf, a central character of *Free Women*. (7)

Wulf keeps four notebooks at the beginning in order to separate things off from each other, but when they are completed as fragments, they come together as something new known as *The Golden Notebook*. So Lessing maintains that "the essence of the book, the organization of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize" (10). In the inner Golden Notebook events and ideas have coalesced and the divisions have been broken down. Throughout Lessing's novel her characters discuss, theorise, and dogmatise their own thoughts and behaviours as well as each other's. As maintained by Lessing, "writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasure, emotions – and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas – can't be yours alone" (13). *The Golden Notebook* entertains the notion of a main character who is some sort of an artist with writer's block, a motif which continues to be explored because the theme of the artist has been central to literary art for some time.

Proponents believe that the metafictional novel gains significance beyond its fictional realms by outwardly projecting its inner self-reflective tendencies. Metafiction allows its readers a better understanding of the structure of narrative while providing a model for understanding the contemporary experiences of the world. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* Linda

Hutcheon differentiates the terms "metafiction" and "historiographic metafiction." Hutcheon proposes a type that privileges

> The novel genre, and one form in particular, a form that I want to call 'historiographic metafiction.' By this I mean those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages … it is narrative – be it in literature, history, or theory – that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs. (5)

Works are dubbed historiographic metafictions because of their conscious self-reflexivity and concerns with history. The earliest histories contain fictional elements. They are implicit amalgamations of fact and myth. The composition of the word "history" itself contains the word "story." Yet, as realism took root, history came to represent "objective" fact and the novel came to represent subjective "fiction." Modernist and postmodern questioning challenged the authority of histories by acknowledging that the "fact" presented is the author's subjective interpretation. Historiographic metafictional novels are intensely self-reflexive but they often articulate, according to Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, "this contradictory doubleness: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the 'world' and literature" (124). These novels bridge the gap between historical and fictional works by recombining the two genres. Beyond reconnecting history and fiction, Hutcheon remarks that "postmodern intertextuality challenges … both closure and single, centralized meaning. Its willed and wilful provisionality rests largely upon its acceptance of the inevitable textual infiltration of prior discursive practices" (127). Through its play on "known truth," historiographic metafiction questions the absolute "knowability" of the past, signalling the ideological implications of historical representations.

Another example of a metafictional novel is Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). Rushdie's novel is Saleem's life story, which he writes and simultaneously relates to Padma. She is not a reader but a listener. From one angle, *Midnight's Children* is fiction about fiction and an allegory about writing. The story is always told to Padma, its transmission is oral, and therefore, the novel is filled with retrospectives, digressions and summaries of the narrative throughout. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem foretells and summarises his story frequently as he describes his bodily disintegration: "Please believe that I am falling apart … I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug" (37). The narrative strategies of the novel include a first-person narrator (Saleem) and a considerable length which

allows a range of characters and parallel stories. Saleem Sinai is introduced though his own voice. He is born after a considerable part of the narrative is over. The opening of the novel begins:

> I was born in the city of Bombay … once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more … On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. (9)

Saleem organises his own complicated autobiography and birth making according to the analogous circumstances of the emergent independent nation of India. He remarks "Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world" (9). His birth is invested with great promise. Newspapers celebrate Saleem's arrival. Nehru himself ratifies his position in a personal letter in which he writes that "we shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (122). Like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Saleem goes on to relate a substantial part of his personal and family history before finally describing his birth. With all its retrospective and prospective sways, *Midnight's Children* leads us to the present standpoint of 1978, back to Saleem's father Aadam's boyhood, and then down to the years of free India. A metaphor for this back-and-forth movement in the narrative is what Saleem calls "the metronome music of Mountbatten's countdown calendar" (106).

Apart from metafictional parody of novelistic conventions such as *ab ovo*, foretelling and foregrounding narrative threads, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* manifests stylistic influences and self-reflexivity in its intertexts. In an "Introduction: The Politics of Salman Rushdie's Fiction," M. D. Fletcher maintains that

> Rushdie has been characterized as eclectic in respect of the variety of authors that seem to have influenced his style … The Western influences usually cited are Rabelais and Sterne, and, more directly, Günter Grass and Gabriel García Márquez, while Rushdie himself has suggested Dickens and Swift in addition. (3)

Reading Rushdie's novel is a postmodern experience because of its parodic intertextuality and commentary on previous texts such as *Tristram Shandy*, *The Tin Drum* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. A close reading of the novel unveils cross-references to the *One Thousand and One Nights*, which is so recurrent and so explicit. Some critics hold that in characterising Aadam (pun on Adam) Aziz, a doctor, Saleem's grandfather, Rushdie is alluding to the main Indian character in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, thus evoking the preceding stock of literature about colonial India and parodying colonial intertexts. However, beyond Western literature,

there are also influences from Eastern traditions and intertexts on Rushdie's narrative, especially due to the affinities between his novel and oral narratives. Perhaps to some extent the digressions and reiterations combined are typically lingering techniques of traditional Indian oral storytelling.

Postcolonial cultures have all, in various ways, been influenced by the interrelationship between orality and literacy. This is obvious in societies where oral culture predominated in the pre-colonial period. In the case of India, where many highly developed pre-colonial literary cultures flourished, there were also vibrant folk cultures that remained a vigorous part of popular culture and interacted with the literary traditions. Rushdie alludes to both European and Indian sources as he gives voice to a whole range of cultures. M. D. Fletcher asserts that the technique associated with oral storytelling such as

> Foreshadowing and flashback, digressions within digressions, and the competition/complementarity of different stories all conspire to undermine linearity and produce the impression of simultaneity … The unreliable … narrator in *Midnight's Children* deceives and withholds information … thus providing a variety of versions of events. (13)

Thus, Rushdie perceived how valuable and appealing storytelling was for Indian readers and he took the figures of illiterate men and women and imagined similar characters for *Midnight's Children* in the form of Tai (a boatman and storyteller) and Padma. She is a vital spur and judge of Saleem's autobiography, his "necessary ear" (149). Moreover, Saleem needs her support because his memory tends to fail without it: "It has been two whole days since Padma stormed out of my life … A balance has been upset; I feel cracks widening down the length of my body; because suddenly I am alone" (149). Padma keeps the actual reader of the novel alert and critical so that s/he is not absorbed into the world of the narrative because the novel is not mimetic of the real world, and thus remains, in a postmodern way, a self-reflexive piece. Ultimately, Rushdie's reader and collaborator will respond to the nature, problems and process of novel writing.

Furthermore, literary intertexts are not the only metafictional devices Rushdie uses in his novel, and it becomes clear when his fiction intertwines with film. Scholars of Salman Rushdie's work say the Bombay talkies and the European avant-garde have largely influenced his novels. This intertextuality goes beyond merely paying tribute to cinema in his works; Rushdie copiously uses filmic vocabulary in his literary texts, and it is most in evidence in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem states that "nobody from Bombay should be without a basic film vocabulary" (33) and his own expertise with the conventions of Bollywood is used in his

narrative and his interpretation of events. In an essay entitled "*Midnight's Children* and Reader Responsibility," Keith Wilson argues that Rushdie's novel "deliberately invites a questioning of the credentials of the novelist and of the illusory surface objectivity of the novel form. Indeed, it uses that other most beguilingly quasi-objective are form, the cinema, as a running metaphor for the deceiving clarities of realist art" (62). The real and the fantastic spheres are similarly overlaid in *Midnight's Children* by its relation of characters to mythical archetypes. Due to these filmic elements, reality itself becomes questionable in the text and so does realism as a mode of representation, which, in turn, is open to scrutiny. On the role of the artists and entertainer figures pertaining to realism, Saleem writes that

> Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema … and gradually moving up … until your nose is almost pressed against the screen … tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves – or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality. (165-166 italics in original)

The question that remains in *Midnight's Children* is that the subversions of realism can be used both for oppression and for liberation. There are a number of failed or would-be artists in the novel, which embody the essential fallibility of the artist and of whatever medium he or she uses. Saleem's film-making uncle Hanif discovers a passion for realistic screenplays set against the mythical concerns of the Bombay film industry. An example of Hanif's documentary realism rests on a story of a pickle factory, for example.

Salman Rushdie does not always accurately recount the events of recent Indian history during the course of *Midnight's Children*. At times, he makes mistakes with respect to details or dates, but he makes them intentionally, in order to comment on the unreliability of historical and biographical accounts. Rushdie has cleverly designed the chapters of *Midnight's Children*, adopting a homely Indian image for his creation; he refers to each of the thirty chapters as a jar of chutney:

> Every pickle-jar … contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time! I, however, have pickled chapters. Tonight, by screwing the lid firmly on the jar … I reach the end of my long-winded autobiography; in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories. (459)

The process of "chutnification" refers to the process of "pickling," or writing about, historical and life events. The novel's self-reflexivity is shown in Saleem's discussion of his writing as he depicts both pickling and writing as great work of preserving. He writes that

> Rising from my pages comes the unmistakable whiff of chutney … I, Saleem Sinai, have dedicated my latter days to the large-scale preparation of condiments … And, I grant, such mastery of the multiple gifts of cookery and language is rare indeed … by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks. (37-38)

In this construct, each chapter falls into the mould of a pickle jar. The thirty chapters correspond to the number of years Saleem has lived, although the narration does not progress linearly. One jar is left empty because it is reserved for the future, and thus the novel ends on a note against closure. In the last paragraph, the text is handed over to the reader. Moreover, it is done with a pessimistic overtone seeing as the narrator declares that

> Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching … reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as … they will trample my son … because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes" (463).

He suggests that each writer will prevail only for a short while, as fate will give the Indians different versions about India. The writer is both master and victim because s/he reinterprets and suffers, so generations of writers must reinterpret India for the Indians and, in all probability, for the Western readers too. The varied intertexts and the multitude of stories make *Midnight's Children* richly inclusive. Nevertheless, it is Saleem's character and voice, his pervasive consciousness, which hold the novel together.

Postmodernism is, from the start, polemical because narrative subverts conventions from within and reworks the forms and contents of the past. Novels such as *Pictures from an Institution*, *The Golden Notebook*, and *Midnight's Children*, which privilege intertextual readings of prior texts, have inaugurated fluidity between literary genres. Postmodern texts are parodic in their relation to the genres incorporated intertextually. Thus, in some senses, parody is a perfect postmodern form. In all art today, postmodernism is seemingly marked by a self-reflexive examination of the limits and possibilities of the discourses of art and language. In other words, postmodern fiction manifests a certain introversion, a self-conscious internalisation of the act of writing because it questions the way we understand the world through our narratives – past and present. Therefore, postmodern fiction writers appropriate and reformulate the canonical modes of discourse so that they create a plurality of discourses. Unifying coherence has been abandoned in favour of provisionality and heterogeneity because historical and narrative stability and closure are undermined from within. Readers come to acknowledge that our perception of the past depends on texts but that, however, this

inevitable textuality and the types of knowledge it covers are inevitably dynamic and open to further questioning.

2. Coetzee's metatextual artifices in Foe, The Master of Petersburg and Elizabeth Costello

J. M. Coetzee has produced overtly self-conscious fictions that draw openly on postmodernism by addressing Western preoccupations with the issues of textuality. His novels occupy a unique position in South African literature and more generally in the development of the twentieth-century novel. Theories about textuality are expressed in their most direct form in *Foe* (1986), Coetzee's most obviously metafictional book. *Foe* is a postcolonial reworking of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), but it also contains allusions to other texts by Defoe. Its allusiveness and self-consciousness are traits which validate and justify the metafictional quality of the novel. In *Foe*, Susan Barton is the intermediary of Cruso's story (Coetzee omits the 'e'), and seeks out Foe (as Defoe was originally called) to provide him with the facts about the island so that he can write a book on her experience. Coetzee's *Foe* ultimately raises questions about power and textuality while at the same time considering the issue of canonicity. Dominic Head holds that *Robinson Crusoe*

> … is not just … a canonical English text – Defoe is the father of the English novel in conventional accounts – but as an embodiment of the great myth of Western imperialism, an enthusiastic narrative of the project of 'civilizing' virgin territories and indigenous peoples. (113)

Foe challenges the reader throughout to speculate on the question of "truth" in Defoe's novel and the issue of how stories are told and who controls them. There are competing versions of the truth in the Cruso story which fall on the marginalised characters of Susan Barton and Friday. Nevertheless, it is Barton's point of view that prevails through much of *Foe*. Part I of Coetzee's novel is a record of Barton's experience as a castaway in the form of a letter to the author Foe:

> 'Do you think of me, Mr Foe, as Mrs Cruso or as a bold adventuress? Think what you may, it was I who shared Cruso's bed and closed Cruso's eyes, as it is I who have disposed of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island'. (45)

Reading the dialogue between Barton and the sea captain one notices how Coetzee hinges on the fine points of storytelling and bookselling parallel to writing the truth:

> 'It is a story you should set down in writing and offer to the booksellers,' he urged … 'but what little I now of book-writing tells me its charm will quite vanish when it is set down baldly in print. A liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied by art. (40)

Thus, both go on talking about the aesthetics of literature to conclude that, and according to the captain, "the booksellers will hire a man to set your story to rights, and put in a dash of colour too, here and there" (40). The captain also points out "their trade is in books, not in truth" (40) when Barton persists she will not allow lies about herself in her own story.

The second part of *Foe* is a series of letters from Barton to Foe. In these epistolary messages she thanks Foe for money, she answers his questions about her time on the island. However, her letters soon become wonderings about Foe's life as storyteller: "Can you not take us into your house? Why do you keep me apart? … I climb the staircase … and tap at the door. You are sitting at the table … gazing out over the fields, thinking, stroking your chin with your pen" (49). Barton digresses about Foe's ongoing projects and the writings he has planned for future publication:

> 'Your papers are kept in a chest beside the table. The story of Cruso's island will go there page by page as you write it, to lie with a heap of other papers … also books of voyages to the New World, memoirs of captivity … chronicles of the wars … and a multitude of castaway narratives, most of them, I would guess, riddled with lies' (50)

Brenda Marshall states in *Teaching the Postmodern* that "Foe as author is consistently presented as godlike, and thus, as representing a traditional logocentric world view … this reinforces the concepts of Author as God the Father … the purveyor of ultimate Truth, the Law" (60). However, this detailed characterisation of Foe relies solely on Susan Barton's point of view. She finds that the only way she will be set free from the exasperating wait she lived on the island and for her story to come out is to write it herself. Barton's imagined story is entitled "The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related" (67), however, she never ceases her attempts to urge hastiness from Foe. Notwithstanding her blunt dedication to writing, Barton finally recognises she is not worthy to be a writer as "my stories seem always to have more applications that I intend … Some people are born storytellers; I, it would seem, am not" (81). But in an apparently contradictory statement she casts doubts on Foe's creativity and inventiveness underlining the important role she plays in the whole Cruso story: "Yet where would you be without the woman? … Could you have made up Cruso and Friday and the island with its fleas and apes and lizards? I think not. Many strengths you have, but invention

is not one of them" (72). The decisive discussion is about authorship and control, and the relation between reality and truth.

Brenda Marshall maintains that "the structure of *Foe* becomes so explicitly metafictional at the end, where someone from outside the work steps into the novel" (77). Parts III and IV are no longer in letter form. Written in the present tense they are Susan Barton's first-person narration of the place Foe chose as his hideaway. Part IV begins with the sentence "the staircase is dark and mean" (153) the same words as the beginning of Part III except for the verb tense which has changed from the past to the present. This last section retraces Barton's visit to Foe's house which proved to be inadequate during the first attempt (Part III). The narrative voice of Part IV is an "I" outside the story that has been obliterated from the novel so far only to step in to finish the task Barton failed to do. As the narrator approaches Defoe's lodgings a second time he reads, "a plaque … bolted to the wall. *Daniel Defoe*, *Author*" (155) making it, as stated by Dominic Head, "a detail which places us in the literary-historical present, from which the cultural project of the novel as a genre is being examined" (125). In Foe's room the narrator comes across the manuscript of Susan Barton's island experiences in a dispatch box. He begins to read the words with which *Foe* opens: "I read the first words of the tall, looping script: 'Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further'" (155). The narrator slips "over-board" metaphorically diving into Barton's text and into the sea where he finds himself among the shipwreck. The hulk appears to combine three different ships: Cruso's wreck; Barton's ship; and the ship that rescues her. According to Marshall, the levels of narrative in *Foe* are interwoven and receding thus suggesting "Derrida's discussion of an endless chain of signifiers, in which there is no final 'truth' or transcendental signified: each signified becomes a pointing signifier" (78). On the subject of literary reversion, Steven Connor debates that Coetzee's *Foe* should be perceived as "a 'prequel', whose main concern is not with the events which have taken place on the island, but with the struggles over the narrative of those events" (135). Connor goes onto argue that the "I" in the final episodes "may be Foe, or Defoe, or Susan, or Coetzee himself, or some compound of them all, [who] begins to rewrite the rewritten narrative which Susan Barton has already provided" (137). Coetzee's final lines in *Foe* mark the text's postmodern openness and its shifting voices determine that closure is far from being the central issue. Coetzee has reinvented the story of Robinson Crusoe, and in doing so, directs the reader's attention to the seduction and tyranny of storytelling.

An examination of the nature of authorship and of the writer's authority over his subject broadly defines Coetzee's *Foe* overall, though it may also be applied to his *The Master of Petersburg* (1994). Dominic Head believes that *The Master of Petersburg* addresses the question of authorship with metafictional complexity which is only measured up to by *Foe* among Coetzee's earlier books. Unlike the postcolonial tendency of *Foe* and its relationship to the Western canon, Head contends that *The Master of Petersburg* "makes a gesture to extend the broader questions about authorship and responsibility, and the directions for the postmodernist novels, questions which here stem from problems in Dostoevsky's poetics" (144). The "master" of the novel's title is a fictionalised Dostoevsky who is the protagonist of the story. The book tells the story of Dostoevsky who returns from exile to St. Petersburg to reclaim the effects of his adopted son Pavel. Pavel was a member of the Nechaev gang – an anarchist movement dedicated to freedom – and is said to have committed suicide but may have been murdered. The novel is written in the confessional mode highlighting Coetzean preoccupations and unveiling his intertextual investigations. Connor asserts that "contemporary fiction seems marked by the imperative of the eternal return … telling has become compulsorily belated, inextricably bound up with retelling, in all its idioms" (123). Connor bears in mind, however, the practice of fictionally rewriting cultural texts which are

> … distinguished from other forms of cultural mimicry … consist[ing] of a particularized and conscientious attachment to a single textual precedence, such that its departures from the original must be measures in terms of its dependence upon it. (124)

In *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee has insinuated himself into the rifts between the facts and the fiction producing an account of the relations of writers to events. It is also a narrative about a father's painful adjustment to the death of a son and a critique of the human condition.

In the light of *Foe*'s treatment of canonicity, *The Master of Petersburg* retraces the works of the powerful Fyodor Dostoevsky in order to cast a new understanding on the literary masters of the Western tradition. In this sense, mastery is used to signify authorial ambivalence and transition because as a postmodern text Coetzee's novel avoids any label of mastery or totality. The novel's title announces that Coetzee's Dostoevsky is "The Master" and it is further confirmed through a dialogue between Dostoevsky and the property owner:

> 'You are an artist, a master,' she says. 'It is for you, not for me, to bring him back to life.'
>
> *Master*. It is a word he associates with metal – with the tempering of swords, the casting of bells. A master blacksmith, a founding-master. *Master of life*: strange term …

> 'I am far from being a master,' he says. 'There is a crack running through me. What can one do with a cracked bell? A cracked bell cannot be mended.' (140-141)

However, Dostoevsky recalls a cracked bell which still tolls in its temple suggesting that like the shattered bell he is, in spite of everything, good as a literary master. But Pavel's journal has a number of lines on his father as master that denote some ridicule: '"'The Smitkina': Anya, his wife. 'The Master': himself. Is this what Maximov meant when he warned against hurtful passages? If so, then Maximov should know this is a pygmy arrow" (218). The reader comes across other references to masters of universal literature in Coetzee's book. Besides the clear indications of Dostoevsky's historical importance: "There was no space for all of them. She hesitates. 'We have a book of yours. *Poor Folk*. It was one of my husband's favourites'" (25) and his most renowned work: "'I have read your book *Crime and Punishment*'" (177), there are allusions to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (177).

Issues of narrative fiction, authorship, and the construction of history are ongoing themes in the novel, and they hinge on the discussion about textuality. Nechaev and Dostoevsky talk about the responsibility of the author of ideas and the role of history and how it can be hastened:

> You keep talking about the insides of people's minds. History isn't thoughts, history isn't made in people's minds. History is made in the streets. And don't tell me I am talking *thoughts* right now. That is just another clever debating trick … I can think one thing at one minute and another thing at another and it won't matter a pin as long as I *act*. (200 italics in original)

The debate on realism and the rivalry between fiction and history which are particularly invoked in Coetzee is depicted here in Nechaev's speech. He clearly rejects the pre-eminence of textuality in the shaping of ideas since he relates words to actions. Writing about Nechaev's position on fiction, Dominic Head argues that "without paying attention to the construction of ideas, to textuality, the fabric of one's project collapses, ideas become inconsequential, even contradictory" (147). It emphasises, moreover, the responsibility of the writer in modelling minds, rather than commenting on the active role of fiction in activist propaganda as the Nechaevites would prefer. So Head goes on to presume that "the political dimension to this debate is underscored by a simultaneous evocation of censorship, and the distortions it produces" (147). When Dostoevsky is asked to compose a statement for the students' underground newsletter, a printer criticises Nechaev for watching over Dostoevsky as he writes:

> 'Leave him alone … He's a writer, he doesn't work like that … Writers have their own rules. They can't work with people looking over their shoulders.' 'Then they should learn new rules. Privacy is a luxury we can do without. People don't need privacy.' (198)

Therefore, when examining Coetzee's novels, the reader is required to see the significance of the issue of textuality, which becomes a distinctly politicised matter in Coetzee.

Furthermore, the protagonist's confessional mode indicates Coetzee's accomplishment in going over Fyodor Dostoevsky's precursor texts while reinforcing his novel's intertextual nuances. During his literary career Dostoevsky opened a new way towards the dialogic style as opposed to monologism – the dichotomy proposed by Bakhtin when reading Dostoevsky's novels. The characters in Dostoevsky's novels, as Bakhtin sees it, are liberated to speak through autonomous plural voices and consciousnesses which are entirely legitimate, making his novels polyphonic in form. In *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee focuses on "questions of polyphony, the addressive surplus, and the nature of narrative knowledge, through a deliberation on authorial responsibility. This is achieved through a mergence of Dostoevskyan motifs with his own" (Head 151-152). These questions are raised in the final chapter – "Stavrogin" – in which Dostoevsky recalling the death of Pavel struggles with the predicament of writing about the experience when he acknowledges that his fatherly predisposition will surely deceive his authorial control. According to Bakhtinian dialogic criticism Coetzee's protagonist relinquishes his "surplus of vision," his superior knowledge of things, so as to create a space of relative independence where author and character speak dialogically. Yet the bleakness of the last chapter stands out, seeing as Coetzee's Dostoevsky confronts his demons, his Other, on account of his life writing. His Other faces him "in the mirror on the dressing-table [where] he catches a quick glimpse of himself over the table … if not of a full person then of a stick-figure, a scarecrow draped in an old suit" (236). Identifying the apparition is uncertain, although Dostoevsky considers several possibilities only to be discarded immediately: it may possibly turn out to be Pavel; Nechaev; a demon; or even Christ. In addition, an on the mirror image of the stick figure, Head notes "this image of simultaneous authorial responsibility and capitulation – of composition as partial self-effacement – is the goal of Coetzee's project, both its form and its content" (152). Dostoevsky sets out to write two stories, on the blank pages of Pavel's diary, which he does in a clear and careful script, not even once crossing out a single word. At this moment "he is not himself any longer … Instead he is young again, with all the arrogant strength of youth … He is, to a

degree, Pavel Isaev" (242), a persona that reminds Matryona of his son: "'Pavel used to sit like that when he was writing,' she says. 'I thought you were Pavel when I came in'" (246).

In the third chapter of *The Master of Petersburg* Dostoevsky dreams of swimming underwater calling out in search of his son, only to realise that "with each cry or call water enters his mouth; each syllable is replaced by a syllable of water" (17). In his imagination Dostoevsky tries to piece together the circumstances surrounding Pavel's death, which in this scene, culminates in a representation of a metaphorical drowning. This is obviously an allusion to *Foe* and the ultimate scene which is related to the drowning motif. Coetzee has explored tenuous parent-child relationships before, showing them as microcosms which reflect the tension between the powerless and the powerful in totalitarian societies. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, the almost autistic central character finds himself in a position where his duties towards his mother put him in conflict with the state, eventually leading him to passive resistance and death. In *The Master of Petersburg*, however, there is no placation. When the narrative seems to be meandering to dramatic resolution, Coetzee draws back and retreats inside the protagonist's labyrinthine mind, where a different and more tentative catharsis occurs. Coetzee's novel, like most by him, is permeated by a relentless melancholy and avoids a neat ending, making it frustrating. In choosing to resolve the struggle entirely within Dostoevsky, Coetzee has denied engagement with or resistance to his protagonist; he lends his pen to Dostoevsky, hence breaking the silence he has imposed on the protagonist. The book forms and tumbles inside Dostoevsky's thoughts, when, in the end, all the lived experiences are transmuted in a crucible to emerge as writing: first Dostoevsky's and then Coetzee's. Readers soon learn to understand the extent of Coetzee's novels which are both metafictional and intertextual within his own work and in relation to other texts. So it is fair to argue that he does not endorse monologism in his fiction because it is incompatible with the author's goals, and thus Coetzee incorporates Bakhtin's views about the ever-present dialogism in literature. Fiction and novels in particular can only reach a serious significance if the writer makes a space for discussion in his or her text. Postmodernism holds that only as part of earlier discourses may any text derive substance and meaning.

In the light of Tristram's analogy between apothecaries and writers in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Elizabeth Costello too upholds the valuable role of intertexts. In an interview about her most renowned novel called *The House on Eccles Street*, in which she recasts a new and feminist insight into James Joyce's Marion Bloom from *Ulysses*, Costello contends that "certain books are so prodigally inventive that there is plenty of material left over at the end, material

that almost invites you to take it over and use it to build something of your own" (13). There is such a reimagining in a book entitled *The House on Eccles Road* by Judith Kitchen. Like Coetzee's own *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*, Costello's bestseller reworks Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), while at the same time she reiterates her personal opinion that "we can't go on parasitizing the classics for ever … We've got to start doing some inventing of our own" (14-15). Intertextuality may involve pretexts from a wide range of periods and cultures, but the canonised and classical texts are clearly privileged within these bounds. For many centuries critics and historians of literature have dealt with the influence of authors or literary tradition on a later author who is said to adopt, and at the same time change, aspects of the subject matter, form, or style of the earlier writer(s). The influential critic Harold Bloom uses the phrase "anxiety of influence" to identify his radical revision of this standard theory. He asserts that influence consists in a more or less direct borrowing, or assimilation, of the materials and features found in earlier writers. Influence in fact, according to Bloom, is inescapable in the composition of any poem; moreover, it evokes in the author an anxiety to distort the predecessor's work. His concept of anxiety is applied to the reading as well as the writing of poetry. In Bloom's theory a poet, especially since the time of John Milton, is motivated to compose when particularly his imagination is seized by a poem or poems of a precursor. The "belated" poet cannot avoid embodying the distorted parent-poem into his own attempt to create an unprecedentedly original poem. In *The Anxiety of Influence* Bloom identifies six distortive processes which operate in reading a precursor and he calls these processes "revisionary ratios":

> the strong poets have … transform[ed] their blindness towards their precursors into the revisionary insights of their own work. The six revisionary movements that I will trace in the strong poet's life-cycle could as well be more … these seem to be minimal and essential to my understanding of how one poet deviates from another. (10-11)

Since in Bloom's view the revisionary ratios are the categories through which all of us, whether or not we are poets, necessarily read the precursors, his conclusion is that one can never know "the poem-in-itself"; all interpretation is "a necessary misprision," and all "reading is misreading" (7).

In *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee has combined a pattern of varied techniques characteristic of metafiction. He has employed intertextual references and allusions by creating a biography for Costello and by presenting and discussing her works. Fictionality allows for established criticism to elaborate on Costello's book that "*Eccles Street* is a great novel; it will live, perhaps,

as long as *Ulysses*" (11), uncovering the world of critique when the interviewer – Susan Moebius - notes how "critics have concentrated on the way you have claimed or reclaimed Molly from Joyce … in challenging Joyce, one of the father-figures of modern literature" (12). The narrator explains Costello's viewpoint on publicity and the "autograph market" (6); those who take advantage of her informality when she least expects. People like this "she calls them the goldfish … Flecks of gold circling the dying whale, waiting their chance to dart in and take a quick mouthful" (6). Despite acceding to radio and televised interviews, Costello does not look forward to them so she rehearses whole blocks of dialogue so as to take control of the conversations. Coetzee's protagonist constantly struggles with the fact that she is cornered, as a distinguished writer, into public appearances as if she were like an animal putting on a show. As an eminent woman of the humanities Costello accepts that privacy does not withstand the probing from the outside because "once you are on show, you have no private life" (33). Much like her other arguments, Costello's analogy rests on the animals which are showcased in zoos and deprived of a private life. She bears the long and tedious inquires by projecting a picture of herself without actually giving in to the public's prying inquisitiveness and thus safeguarding her privacy. The narrator sees her interviews and lectures as stepping stones towards small victories; conquests which "she has won, more or less. On foreign turf too. She can come home with her true self safe, leaving behind an image, false, like all images" (30). Nevertheless, Costello's son John, who escorts her on her lecture trips, is also in the habit of shielding his mother from those the narrator describes as "the relic-hunters and the contumelists and the sentimental pilgrims" (30). Yet in spite of their blood relation Costello and her son do not epitomise the ideal of closeness, and John is left wondering about his mother's true essence like all her readers.

Often when readers and critics read books they attempt to extrapolate findings and answers about the writer and the novel searching for the reasons behind its story line, which are unlikely in most circumstances. Discovering traces of the author among the characters in the novel or events of a personal nature in its pages tends to be a common exercise while reading a book. In general terms there is an inclination to pigeonhole novels according to literary periods, analytical trends or even the age-old dichotomy between man or woman writer. In *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee, through his central character, is bold enough to delve into the issue of feminism and the overpraised importance of categorising fiction as belonging to women writers. As a writer, Costello used the long-established dichotomy between men and women, but she has overcome it, while society insistently returns to the issue. In John's words,

he asks Moebius early on: "Have you considered the possibility that my mother may have got beyond the man-woman thing? That she may have explored it as far as it goes, and is now after bigger game?" (25). In *Contemporary Feminist Theories* Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones state that

> Feminist theory seeks to analyse the conditions which shape women's lives and to explore cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman … women's subordination and … exclusion from, or marginalisation within, a variety of cultural and social arenas … examining the ways in which … [women] are represented and represent … [themselves] within a range of cultural practices, such as the arts and the media. (1)

Behind feminist criticism lie two centuries of struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles, and for women's social and political rights before it was inaugurated as an approach to literature in the 1960s. There is no consensus about feminism within the multiple movements because "there are," according to Jackson and Jones, "many strands of feminist thinking and numerous areas of contention and debate with feminism" (2). Both theorists believe the key argument seems to dwell on the idea that "'woman' is not coterminous with 'feminist'; to be a feminist implies a particular politicised understanding of being a woman" (2). Feminist literary criticism continues nowadays to be related to feminisms.

An important precursor in feminist criticism was Virginia Woolf, who, in addition to her fiction, wrote *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and numerous other essays on women authors and on their disabilities within what she called a "patriarchal" society that prevented women from realising their creative possibilities. A more radical critical mode began in France with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), a critique of the identification of women as the negative object, or Other, to man as the dominating subject. Feminist criticism, in America, England, France, and other countries, is not a unitary theory because it manifests a great variety of critical theories from Marxism, Psychoanalysis, and Poststructuralism. However, the various feminisms share assumptions that underlie the ways that critics explore the factor of sexual difference in the production, the form and content, the reception, and the critical analysis or works of literature. The basic view among the feminisms is that Western civilisation is pervasively androcentric – that is, it is male-centred and controlled in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains. The further claim is that androcentric ideology pervades those writings which have been traditionally considered great literature, and which until recently were written mainly by men for men. Normally the most highly regarded literary texts focus on male protagonists who embody masculine traits and pursue masculine

interests. Such works, lacking autonomous female role models, and addressed to male readers, leave the woman reader an outsider. The goal of feminist critics, as it has often been asserted, is to enlarge and reorganise the literary canon. Elizabeth Costello has the same position when she rewrites Marion Bloom from Joyce and opens the discussion to the interviewer who includes other major works:

> And I began to wonder about other women whom we think of as having been given a voice by male writers, in the name of their liberation, yet in the end only to further and to serve a male philosophy. I am thinking of D. H. Lawrence's women … but if you go further back they might include Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Anna Karenina … It is a huge question … about the project of reclaiming women's lives in general. (14)

Feminist studies have served to raise the status of many female authors who until the latter part of the twentieth century had been more or less overlooked by scholars and critics and to bring into view others, who have been overlooked, for serious consideration.

The most prominent feminist critics, however, have been preoccupied with the theory of the role of gender in writing. They claim that all Western languages, in all their features, are utterly male-engendered and male-dominated. In a term proposed by Lacan feminist criticism asserts that discourse is phallogocentric. Phallogocentrism, it is claimed, manifests itself in Western discourses in its vocabulary and syntax. A basic problem for theorists is to establish the very possibility of a woman's language that will not, when she writes, be appropriated into the phallogocentric language. Hélène Cixous posits the existence of an incipient "feminine writing" (écriture féminine) which has its source in the mother, in the stage of the mother-child relation before acquiring the male-centred verbal language. Alternatively, Luce Irigaray holds that there is a "woman's writing" which evades the male monopoly and the risk of appropriation into the existing system. In light of the assumptions made by feminist criticism, nonetheless, Coetzee poses more universal and reasonable questions in *Elizabeth Costello*. His characters discuss the unlimited bounds to writing and to the biased nature of the reading process when an author speaks indiscriminately to both genders. An influential and widely read novelist is now an important person in the arts regardless of gender. On this matter, John is the one who curiously broaches the subject: "A key writer … Is she a key writer for all of us, would you say, or just for women? I go the feeling during the interview that you see her solely as a woman writer or a woman's writer. Would you still consider her a key writer if she were a man?" (22). This debate leads up to the notion of embodiment which is required of skilful writers if they are to be believable in what they write. Despite being a woman, John

says, his mother has the strength and imagination needed to embody those or that which she as an artist intends to fictionalise. John further states: "But my mother has been a man … She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences … It is within her powers. Isn't that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?" (22-23). The conversation between John and Susan Moebius works round to their conflicting opinions about how Costello inhabits and embodies her characters and the credibility of her male characters seeing that she is a woman. The interviewer concludes that Costello's "men are believable … but finally it is just mimicry. Women are good at mimicry, better at it than men. At parody, even" (23).

On Costello's recent novel called *Fire and Ice*, set in the Australia of the 1930s about a young man struggling to pursue his painting career, Moebius resumes the question of drawing on the author's early life. The autobiographical seems to dwell throughout textual analysis and theory. One should bear in mind that the autobiography is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself. Though in recent years the distinction between autobiography and fiction has become more and more blurred, as writers include themselves under their own names in novels. Moreover, autobiographies are written in the asserted more of fiction, or mingle fiction and personal experience. Costello, indeed, mentions there are differences between both modes and her *Fire and Ice* is a make-believe world: "Of course we draw upon our own lives all the time – they are our main resource, in a sense our only resource. But no, *Fire and Ice* isn't autobiographical. It is a work of fiction. I made it up" (12). Therefore, Patricia Waugh, on account of metafictional texts, affirms that

> … literary fiction can never imitate or 'represent' the world but always imitates or 'represents' the discourses which in turn construct that world. However, because the medium of all literary fiction is language, the 'alternative worlds' of fiction … can never be totally autonomous. Their linguistic construction … always implicitly evokes the contexts of everyday life. (100)

For this reason, one could argue that the personae that Costello is said to embody and inhabit as a woman writer are believable because she attempts to write from the position of the Other; which in her case means man. Susan Moebius inquires of Costello whether she finds writing from an Other's perspective clear and effortless. Costello replies: "Easy? No. if it were easy it wouldn't be worth doing. It is the otherness that is the challenge. Making up someone other than yourself. Making up a world for him to move in. making up an Australia" (12). Writers obviously fall back on their personal experience when creating their fictive worlds and Costello's case is no different. The narrator in *Elizabeth Costello* explains John's place:

> He is in her books, or some of them. Other people too he recognizes … About sex, about passion and jealousy and envy. She writes with an insight that shakes him … that is what she presumably does to other readers too. That is presumably why, in the larger picture, she exists. (5)

As a writer, Coetzee's protagonist has a contribution in stirring issues in the world and upsetting the status quo she believes has moulded the society she criticises so bluntly. Like his protagonist, Coetzee too is known for his unconventionality and cultural critique, though most readers and critics insist on extrapolating his personal judgements from his literary prose.

By setting up the fictional world of *Elizabeth Costello* in which the protagonist herself plays the role of a committed social and literary critic Coetzee has used metafictional artifices once more to represent his self-conscious view about authorship. Patricia Waugh argues that metafictional novels tend to "create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism'" (6). This oppositional process is present, to some extent, in all fiction, but its importance in the contemporary novel is distinctive. The provisional nature of history and reality is an absolute sense in metafictional writings; there are no longer enduring truths, but a range of devices, parody and impermanent structures. Waugh further acknowledges that "contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins" (29). The postmodern is identified for its subversion and the blurred genres which flow and easily interchange to produce newly-composed contexts. "Postmodernist texts," Waugh claims, "draw attention to the process of the construction of the fictive 'world' through writing" (102). Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* then epitomises the postmodern and the metatextual since it comments on authorship and the writing process as well as representing the creative effort to embody opinions and experiences and inhabit personae.

Autobiographies, confession, memoir, and Coetzee's autrebiography in Boyhood, Youth and Elizabeth Costello

1. Autobiography as a genre and research field

The broad assessment in literature nowadays and that which has been common some time now is that every work of fiction is in one sense or another autobiographical. If the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be considered autobiographical. There is no doubt whatsoever that the writer leaves traces of his life and personal experience in the pages s/he fills with words. Biographies of the writing self undoubtedly come to pass into fiction. What seems to be the issue, or what has been assumed central for literary theory – especially since the eighteenth century – is that of establishing autobiography as a genre as opposed to fiction. Thus, both fiction and autobiographical writings were supposed to conform to their separate genres and follow the rules and conventions fixed by the generic codes. In her book *Autobiography*, Linda Anderson argues that

> Autobiography has also been recognized since the late eighteenth century as a distinct literary genre and, as such, an important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction. (1-2)

The first fully developed autobiography is also the most influential – the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, written in the fourth century. The design of this profound spiritual autobiography centres on what became the crucial experience in Christian autobiography and that is the author's mental crisis, and a recovery and conversion in which he discovers his Christian identity and religious vocation. Among later distinguished achievements in autobiography are Rousseau's *Confessions* (1764-70), Goethe's *Poetry and Truth* (1810-31), and the autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams and Gertrude Stein (published in 1933 under the title *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*).

The author's discovery of his identity and vocation as a poet or artist are expressed in Wordsworth's autobiography in verse, *The Prelude* (completed 1805, published in revised form 1850), James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915), and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1965). In recent years the distinction between autobiography and fiction has become more and more blurred as authors include themselves under their own names in novels, and autobiographies are written in the asserted mode of fiction, or mingle fiction and personal experience as a way to get at one's essential life story. Moreover, with the loosening of New Criticism's hold on literary scholarship, critics and theorists began reading autobiographies as literary texts, rather than documentary histories. In her *Autobiography*

Anderson cites Paul de Man's essay entitled "Autobiography as De-Facement," which she considers to be a radical piece of criticism. Anderson affirms that in his essay de Man has signalled the end of autobiographical writing. Anderson's view of de Man's thoughts is that

> most important of all for de Man, however, is the problem that is encountered as soon as one attempts to make a distinction between fiction and autobiography, and finds oneself taken up in the whirligig of 'undecidability', inhabiting a threshold between contradictory ideas … de Man proposes that autobiography is not a genre at all but a figure of reading or understanding that is in operation not only within autobiography but also across a range of texts. (12)

According to Anderson some critics propose there is one absolute condition for autobiography and that depends on the identity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. Though identification is hardly possible unless one understands it as intentionality, which "signals the belief that the author is behind the text … the author becomes the guarantor of the 'intentional' meaning or truth of the text, and reading a text therefore leads back to the author as origin" (Anderson 2).

In an interview with David Attwell in his *Doubling the Point*, J. M. Coetzee acknowledges that "all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" (17). Linda Anderson too argues that "criticism and autobiography are difficult to separate, since they are both self-conscious 'about language' and thus engaged in the same task" (6). Critics posit that it was poststructuralism which provided the intellectual pathway to debate the role of the personal or the autobiographical within criticism. It is not a new phenomenon, however, seeing as scholarship has always been made up of personal narratives, but the term "personal criticism" was only coined in the 1990s. Self-reflexivity, nonetheless, is not only bound to fiction and creativity because contemporary writers are aware of their literary antecedents and they are self-conscious about the burden of modern culture. Therefore, David Lodge says "metafictional writers have a sneaky habit of incorporating potential criticism into their texts and thus 'fictionalizing' it" (208). Postmodern discourse, for some decades now, has been swaying between the boundaries of academic literary studies and fiction ever since the dawn of the postmodern philosophical novel. Mark Currie in his *Postmodern Narrative Theory* writes that "the borderline between fiction and criticism has been a point of convergence where fiction and criticism have assimilated each other's insights, producing a more inventive kind of criticism and a new species of the novel of ideas" (53). If one recognises that novelists have aspired to assimilate the perspectives of criticism into the narrative process, then reciprocal contamination is certain.

The fluidity and volatility which mark postmodern literature have opened up a doorway to multivocal and less constrained prose writing in generic terms which border on the autobiographical. Numerous titles in contemporary fiction already combine autobiographics with fiction without the authors actually declaring it outright because the blurredness of genres is agreed to. Nevertheless, this composite of both genres is not in point of fact an aesthetic choice when a writer decides to tell a story. Any autobiography – in the generic sense of the word – is beforehand a construction based on fiction and nonfiction. Coetzee maintains in *Doubling the Point* that "all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" (391). The story's plot relies on the writer's account of events because it is s/he who singles out what to include and what to omit, and it is the writer who elaborate on his or her life experience which already entails fictionalised details of the past. The unfolding of the plot is determined by the process of writing or rather comes from the process of writing. On this issue Coetzee carries on to argue that in his perspective autobiography is "a kind of self-writing in which you are constrained to respect the facts of your history … You choose the facts insofar as they fall in with your evolving purpose" (18). Coetzee goes even further in his thoughts as he analyses the position of biography and its relation to the fictive mode: "Biography is a kind of storytelling in which you select material from a lived past and fashion it into a narrative that leads into a living present in a more or less seamless way" (391). One condition, however, which sets autobiography apart from biography, is the author's privileged access to information and being able to trace the timeline from the past to the present, described in Coetzee's words, as "a self-interested enterprise" (391).

Narrative – or stories – as we may also call them – are forms of discourse which arrange events in a sequential order with a clear beginning, middle and end. A narrative is not just a series of vignettes, it should amount to something and the units must have a meaningful connection to one another. Delving into the overarching concept of narrative in their "Introduction" to *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*, Lewis and Sandra Hinchman write that

> Narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience, and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it. (xvi)

It is up to narrative to organise and make clear the world of human events the narrator experiences in that world, and not to theorise about the essential reality underlying it. Lewis and Sandra Hinchman believe that, according to theory, the mind remains detached from the

phenomena which are examined, thus the mind is described as isolated. On the other hand, stories lean on the storyteller and the audience, though now and then the audience is only the self perceived as addressee. Narratives do not simply emulate reality because, as Lewis and Sandra Hinchman see it, "storytelling inevitably involves selectivity, rearranging of elements, redescription, and simplification … the common thread is the notion that narrative somehow mediates between self and world, either evoking or simply creating order and meaning" (xvi). Our concept of story implies a progression of events but also a teller and an addressee to whom the story is told. In his *The Art of Fiction* David Lodge states that "every novel must have a narrator, however impersonal, but not necessarily a narratee. The narratee is any evocation of, or surrogate for, the reader of the novel within the text itself" (80).

The events of life, however, are anything but a simple sequential order. They constitute a complicated set of temporal arrangements that interweave and receive their meaning and distinctness from within action itself. Plot is the unique device one uses in order to make sense of recollections and anticipations in our lives. In another essay entitled "Memory," Lewis and Sandra Hinchman hold that "through narrative emplotment, we organize, integrate, and seek an accommodation with temporality … emplotment humanizes our experience of time, making its passage meaningful for us" (1). By definition, fictional narratives depict events, which of course never took place, but they are considered true-to-life due to what might have happened if they had really occurred. The great storytellers in literary history have made readers aware of how much art is implicated in all storytelling. David Novitz states that "part of our fascination with narrative is its flexibility. It can take indefinitely many forms, and so allows its authors considerable scope for their own inventiveness" (147). Since works of literature and fictional identities are imagined and construed with a possible audience in mind then, as Novitz puts it, "the construction of narrative identities, like that of works of art, is often highly inventive" (158). Novitz further alleges that this creativity in books requires an imaginative role from those who read them, thus triggering feelings of desire and the need for empathy with others meaning that "stories about ourselves, in which we figure as central subjects, and to which others attend imaginatively, invite the sort of empathy we most desire" (148).

As conscious beings, as temporal beings, we are powerfully shaped by recollections which make up our memory. It is undeniable that "there is more to my person than the body I stand up in … I am talking about, among other things, of my past actions, aspirations, jealousies, fears, beliefs, expectations, values, knowledge, neuroses, and obsessions" (Novitz

144). Even if the story claims to be about real life events, hence posing as nonfictional, the way the writer relates and construes his/her memories and impressions, and the way they are either stressed or passed over in his/her life writing, depends on creativity. Stephen Crites asserts in his article "The Narrative Quality of Experience" that many support the idea that narrative form is an artifice, that "it is simply one of the ways we organize a life of experience that is in itself inchoate" (29). But its inchoateness is what characterises life and memories, and it falls on literature to actually assemble and make the events coherent. Crites goes on to affirm that "storytelling is not an arbitrary imposition upon remembered experience … [images exist] as transient episodes in an image-stream, cinematic" (35). He prolongs his analysis on this subject by pointing out that there is an important difference between recollection and memory. For Crites "all the sophisticated activities of consciousness literally re-collect the images lodged in memory into new configurations, reordering past experience" (34-35). It depends on a simple order of succession, an order wherein the images of the lived experience have been recorded on the memory. Stephen Crites calls it the "lasting chronicle … [which] does not need to be recollected … but merely to be recalled" (35). In this chronicle of memory there is only the simple temporality of sequence and of duration, and not yet the quality of past, present, and future. According to Crites, memory, containing the past, is but one way of expression that is always conditioned by those incidents which seem geared towards the present or future.

As far as storytelling goes, it is not just a verbal recounting of events because the difference between art and life lies in an informed knowledge about the life experience. To take Coetzee's metaphor in *The Master of Petersburg*, telling is done by a masterly writer who must possess a superior understanding of the circumstances, bordering on omnipotence. David Carr makes this point when he argues that the difference is not based on organisation against chaos; his argument states that "the absence in life of that point of view which transforms events into a story by *telling* them" (14 italics in original). Narrative selectively mentions real or fictional events and with that orders them in a plot so that the discourse can acquire a true significance from the way its parts are related. Clearly narrative allows the writer to emphasise some incidents, minimise others, but at the same time admitting all as a meaningful whole. It is the definite thrill of mastery, of undisputed sway, which ultimately belongs to the craftiest of writers whose imaginative stories become exhilarating enterprises in which readers effectively participate.

Storytelling, whether metaphorical or literal, is a social activity. Firstly, because the self is an addressee to its own narration, and secondly the story of the author – his or her life and activity – is told as much to others as to himself or herself. The individual is built on interpersonal relationships as well as intrapersonal reflection, and for that reason, the self is itself an interplay of roles. For Mikhail Bakhtin "the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types … and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262). He maintains that language is the medium for consciousness, and subjectivity is always dialogical because it is implicated in the process of social interaction. In Bakhtin's opinion, the subject speaks through multiple voices due to what he has called heteroglossia, the proliferation of languages, words, and meanings that "mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and [are] interrelated dialogically" (263). The utterances of the speaking subject, in this sense, is irreducibly dialogic, contestatory, and heteroglossic. The concept of heteroglossia provides a means to join consciousness to culture and to refocus questions of textuality. The self's language is forever a language permeated by the voices of others, voices out of the sociocultural field. So Bakhtin contends that

> A dialogue of languages is a dialogue of social forces perceived not only in their static co-existence, but also as a dialogue of different times, epochs and days … co-existence and becoming are here fused into an indissoluble concrete unity that is contradictory, multi-speeched and heterogeneous. (365)

Dialogism holds the claim that there are always other voices in the text, that even seemingly monologic texts can be read as heteroglossic, and the autobiographical subject is someone prone to the play of voices.

The heteroglossia of language and consciousness is not specific to a particular genre, nor is it specific to women's texts as opposed to men's texts. As such, "the novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (Bakhtin 261), and its discourses may all be taken as distinct points of view on the world. The narrator's voice is a dialogical voice through which heterogeneous discourses of identity cross the tongue. To paraphrase Bakhtin, the word in one's mouth is always someone else's word. He writes that "someone else's is the opposite of one's own and implies otherness – of place, point of view, possession or person … Being someone else makes dialogue possible. The novel is that literary art form most indebted to otherness" (423). Therefore, the reader should be careful not to discredit certain texts as somehow inauthentic or in a different "not right" voice.

2. The confession in Age of Iron and Coetzee's third-person memoirs

There is a special kind of limited dialogue emerging in Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), in which the mother is interrogated by the absent daughter, who becomes a phantom confessor. Ultimately, however, the reader occupies the role of a distanced confessor much like the part the audience performs in Peter Shaffer's stage play *Amadeus* (1980) as "Ghosts of the distant Future" (14), who are conjured to be confessors of Antonio Salieri. Both confessional instances – Coetzee's and Shaffer's – are necessary auditors so that the conceit actually works. *Age of Iron* takes the form of a letter narrated by the elderly Mrs Curren, and notionally addressed to her daughter in the United States. Mrs Curren's intentions are that her letter-in-progress is to be posted to her daughter after her death. But indications are given throughout the novel that this is primarily a confession by and for the self. Ironically her daughter is the living being she is closest to, the one she trusts, and the one she turns to when she learns about her cancer. This raises the question of why she is writing to her daughter, but she poses and answers it herself: "To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me" (6). The letter, in effect, is a confession for the self. There has to be of course a notional addressee for a confession to occur, and this function is fulfilled by the absent daughter, as well as by the unsympathetic Vercueil, and by the distanced reader, which is an aspect of the reading process. However, there is no listener to engage in explicit conversation. Coetzee outlines his thoughts about confessional writing in *Doubling the Point* when he mentions that "we can demarcate a mode of autobiographical writing that we can call the *confession*, as distinct from the *memoir* and the *apology*, on the basis of an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self" (252 italics in original).

Moreover, it seems that Mrs Curren, as she approaches death, is trying to bequeath her daughter with her learned experience by sharing the events of the last few weeks and the reassessment of her values and habits which she has developed over a lifetime. Mrs Curren writes in the long letter that

> These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on. Once upon a time you lived in me as once upon a time I lived in my mother; as she still lives in me, as I grow toward her, may I live in you. (131)

Despite her old age, Mrs Curren shows a startling lucidity in passing on her knowledge, but only on the agreement that it should be done after her death. She insists that her daughter must read the letter knowing that its writer is no longer there to be questioned. This is an issue

Coetzee returns to frequently when he is interviewed about his fiction. He maintains in *Doubling the Point*:

> I am immensely uncomfortable with questions – like this one – that call on me to answer for (in two senses) my novels, and my responses are often taken as evasive … What I say is marginal to the book, not because I as author and authority so proclaim, but on the contrary because it would be said from a position peripheral, posterior to the forever unreclaimable position from which the book was written. (205-206)

The most significant confessional scene in the novel involves Mrs Curren talking aloud to Vercueil, coming to terms with the irrelevance of her ideas. Vercueil does not respond and shows no indication of having paid attention, so Mrs Curren, telling the episode to her daughter, asks: "Is a true confession still true if it is not heard? Do you hear me, or have I put you to sleep too?" (166). In Coetzee's conception of the end of confession, Mrs Curren's impression is true because it is not directly heard. The truth and the self-knowledge are produced by Vercueil's uselessness as a confessor and his unreliability as a messenger. The delivery of the letter is, thus, neither part of the narrative design, nor cultivated as a possibility which qualifies the reception of the text. Vercueil's name further underscores this enigmatic role as she says: "'His name is Mr. Vercueil,' I said. 'Vercueil, Verkuil, Verskuil'" (37). Mrs Curren confuses his name with "verkuil" which in Afrikaans means "to cheat" and with the Afrikaans word "verskuil" meaning to hide or conceal. These associations reinforce his position of being unfit for any scheme of atonement she may have imagined with him. Since he does not respond as confessor, Vercueil cannot encourage double thought from her because within the text the confession remains for the self. Coetzee's account of "double thought" is made clear in *Doubling the Point* where he describes the phrase as "the malaise that renders confession powerless to tell the truth and come to an end" (282) in that the "end of confession is to tell the truth to and for oneself" (291). The narrative logic of *Age of Iron* is to reveal a narrator who reaches out as far as possible towards this confessional outcome. Coetzee discusses these problems in his essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" by explaining how the confessional mode is tainted by self-deception. Mixed motives like self-interest and self-congratulation account for the pattern of double thought.

The force of *Age of Iron* is that of personal division involving Mrs Curren's renunciation of all personal investment in life in South Africa, a change which is necessary to engender a reverse movement, the gradual attainment of enlightenment. Mrs Curren

comprehends her unimportant position as a white woman while confronting Vercueil on judgement: "Yet in his case, I was sure, the incomprehension ran deeper. My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white" (79). She is disgusted by the activities of the apartheid regime at the beginning, so her advancement has more to do with a recent sense of extremity in light of her first-hand experience. The narrator's formative experiences are centred on the deaths of two boys. Bheki, the fifteen-year-old son of her house cleaner, Florence, and his friend John, are both shot by police in the course of the narrative. Mrs Curren sees the dead Bheki for herself in Guguletu:

> The inside of the hall was a mess of rubble and charred beams. Against the far wall … were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki … His eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too. The rain had been beating on him for hours … their clothes, their very hair, had a flattened, dead look. (102)

Later, John is shot at Mrs Curren's house, in Florence's quarters, where he had been hiding from the police:

> The woman bundled me indoors. As she closed the door there was a curt explosion, a fusillade of shots, then a long stunned silence, then low talk and, from somewhere, the sound of Vercueil's dog yapping … But the ambulance was already there … [as] I emerged from the front door they were wheeling the body, covered in a blanket, down the driveway, and loading it aboard. (156)

Mrs Curren comes to realise her own role in the political structure more openly as her understanding of the evil surrounding her grows.

The dates Coetzee provides for the writing of his novel are 1986 to 1989, defining years of the anti-apartheid struggle. The wave of nationwide upheaval in the mid-1980s was a response to the government's "total strategy," concerning ideological as well as repressive control. A state of emergency from July 1985 to early 1986 was followed by a still more forceful nationwide State of Emergency which extended from June 1986 to 1990. Imprisonment and torture, with school pupils often the victims, were repeated events of this period. The political context is precisely recalled in *Age of Iron*. This includes references to the Schools' boycott, which Mrs Curren goes on to discuss: "Last year, when the troubles in the schools began, I spoke my mind to Florence. In my day we considered education a privilege, I said. Parents would scrimp and save to keep their children in school. We would have thought it madness to burn a school down" (38-39). At a later stage in the novel Bheki too points out his views when he declares to Mrs Curren:

> They are after everybody. I have done nothing. But anybody they see they think should be in school, they try to get them. We do nothing, we just say we are not going to school. Now they are waging this terror against us. They are terrorists … What is school for? It is to make us fit into the apartheid system. (67)

Governmental control of the media was anther key part of the ideological struggle, registered clearly in Mrs Curren's response to television and newspaper coverage of politics:

> The radio squawked like a parrot behind me … Shooting in Guguletu: whatever Florence knows about it, whatever you know ten thousand miles away … In the news that reaches me there is no mention of trouble, of shooting. The land that is presented to me is a land of smiling neighbors. (53-54)

And "of trouble in the schools the radio says nothing, the television says nothing, the newspapers say nothing. In the world they project all the children of the land are sitting happily at their desks" (39).

The focus, however, is on the personal dissolution. *Age of Iron* begins on the day Mrs Curren has been told that her cancer is terminal, news which, she writes, "the news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused. It was for me to tale in my arms and fold to my chest and take home, without headshaking, without tears" (4). The significance of receiving the damaging truth enacts a principle of coping with difficult self-knowledge. In conformity with this course of action, there are several indications that Mrs Curren's perceptions are changing and there are also suggestions of awakening. In response to Vercueil's insinuation that she is like iron herself, Mrs Curren feels something shatter inside her "like a steamer pulling away from the quay, the ribbons tightening, snapping, falling away" (73). After noticing the dead boys, including Bheki, in Guguletu, she also implies that she has been awakened to some concealed truth: "This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again" (102-103). Together with this element of mimetic representation of political awareness in South Africa, *Age of Iron* displays the familiar self-consciousness about literary styles, as for instance, when Mrs Curren feels as if "it was like living in an allegory" (90). In point of fact, there is an allegorical dimension to her collusion and dissolution, an insinuation that she symbolises the nation as a whole, and the terminal cancer within echoes the metaphorical sociocultural cancer outside. One's standpoint on *Age of Iron* could be that the novel stages a personal struggle which appears and develops within a specific historical situation.

An allegory is a narrative, whether in prose or verse, in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are construed by the writer to make coherent sense of the

primary level of signification, and simultaneously to signify a second order of signification. David Lodge defines allegory in his *The Art of Fiction* as "a specialized form of symbolic narrative, which does not merely suggest something beyond its literal meaning, but insists on being decoded in terms of another meaning" (143). Its close relationship to the implied meaning determines at every point the development of an allegorical narrative. In Coetzee's *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren's approaching death ultimately inspires a certain allegorical conception of reality making her, at several moments, play with the allegorisation of Vercueil, calling him "the messenger" (32), referring to his look as "this other annunciation" (5), and thinking when the moment would come "when the jacket fell away and great wings sprouted from his shoulders" (161). The angel motif reaches its climax when the final sentence of the novel – "He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had" (198) – completes the words Mrs Curren speaks near the beginning – "To embrace death as my own, mine alone" (6). The novel's final sentence can be Mrs Curren's allegory written in the letter to her daughter, but it may just as well be Coetzee's thoughts which now abandon the vagary of the continuous letter-writing.

Vercueil is nevertheless understandable at a literal level. He is a historical sign rather than a metaphor of the breakdown of social order during the last years of apartheid. He is an outcast on the fringes of South African society, alcohol-dependent, homeless, and obviously unaffected by the obligations of human or communal relationship. Mrs Curren describes her first encounter with Vercueil's situation in this manner:

> I came upon a house of carton boxes and plastic sheeting and a man curled up inside, a man I recognized from the streets: tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long, carious fangs, wearing a baggy gray suit and a hat with a sagging brim … A derelict … One of the homeless … An unsavory smell about him … Unclean. (3-4)

Vercueil is so detached from social and political life that he seems to have avoided racial classification on which apartheid rested, unlike Coetzee's central character in *Life & Times of Michael K.* Critics have pointed out that Michael K is the typical victim figure within the South African context, silenced by his position in society as well as by his harelip. Though Coetzee avoids any direct mention to Michael K's colour and class, there are indirect references in the novel: "On the charge sheet he was listed 'Michael Visagie – CM – 40 – NFA – Unemployed'" (70), and the camp doctor says "who is Michaels but one of a multitude in the second class? A mouse who quit an overcrowded, foundering ship" (136). Furthermore, Michael K's ignorance

about his surroundings resembles much of the dissolution and amazement which Mrs Curren experiences in *Age of Iron*. In *Michael K* the protagonist is described in this fashion: "He is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time … A hard little stone, barely unaware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life" (135). It has been clear since the beginning of the novel, however, that Vercueil is an important piece in Mrs Curren's revision of her selfhood. She goes on to describe their relationship and co-dependency in her letter: "Why do I give this man food? … For the same reason I gave you my breast" (7); "Six pages already, and all about a man you never met and never will … When I write about him I write about myself" (9). The letter starts with his arrival in her home, and from then on he is always attached to Mrs Curren and consequently to her daughter. In an account about *Age of Iron* Coetzee observes that the book overlooks heroism and is essentially about heralds – Vercueil being the herald of death – because the novel itself is "the message of someone speaking from the jaws of death, as a backward herald, so to speak, a herald looking and speaking back" (*Doubling the Point* 340).

As a writer Coetzee casts his mind to the past in uncommon and unlikely forms. The last of the interviews with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* proves this line of reasoning entirely since there is a passage in which Coetzee recounts his life story up to the years of 1982 and 1983. What makes the reading unsettling is that he chooses to speak about himself in the following fashion:

> His years in rural Worcester (1948-1951) as a child from an Afrikaans background attending English-medium classes, at a time of raging Afrikaner nationalism, a time when laws were being concocted to prevent people of Afrikaans descent from bringing up their children to speak English, provoke in him uneasy dreams of being hunted down and accused; by the age of twelve he has a well-developed sense of social marginality. (393)

While reading the passage it becomes unmistakable that Coetzee tells the boy's story in the third person and in the present tense. His readers recognised this style of narration when years later Coetzee published *Boyhood* (1997) which also chronicles a particular period in Coetzee's childhood that is written in the present tense with a third-person distance between his writing self and the boy he describes. *Boyhood* is both an adult's memoir of an unhappy childhood and a white South African's memoir of life under apartheid. This novel marks a changing point for Coetzee because until then he had rarely written directly about himself and his novels have had an oblique approach to politics in South Africa. Novels like *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1983) and *Michael K* are, in some way, keen reports of

oppression, even though their plots take place in surreal and depopulated landscapes in which a set of characters move about in obscure webs of power. The main events of *Boyhood* unfold when John moves from Cape Town to Worcester and he is between the ages of ten and thirteen, meaning that the time span is from 1948 to 1951. So the historical circumstances are observed through the eyes of the boy. From the opening sentences, it is obvious that the reader is still in the heart of Coetzean techniques: "They live on a housing estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway line and the National Road" (1). "They" are Coetzee's family, and the protagonist is always "he," never "I," and his name is not mentioned until halfway through the novel: "'*Jis-laaik, maar jy word darem groot, John!*' - You're getting big!" (88).

Coetzee's earlier books habitually depend on first-person narrators such as Magda, the Magistrate, Susan Barton and Mrs Curren, though *Michael K* makes use of the past tense. In this sense, *The Master of Petersburg* sets the tone for the ensuing works of fiction, until the most recent *Elizabeth Costello*, which use both the present tense and third-person narration. Arguably this narrative style is deemed unusual for autobiography seeing that James Joyce's precursor text – *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) – which also tells the story of a young writer and his skills (in this case, growing up in Dublin) unfolds in the past tense. On the use of the third person and the present tense, Derek Attridge, in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, mentions that "the result of this choice of presentational mode is a singular immediacy, one might almost say – depthlessness, in the recounting of events, but not the sense of intimacy we gain from confessional autobiography of a more orthodox sort" (140).

Of the many passages one could take to emphasise this kind of narrative, one could choose the excerpt about the circus:

> Once a year Boswell's Circus comes to Worcester. Everyone in his class goes; for a week talk is about the circus and nothing else. Even the Coloured children go, after a fashion: they hang around outside the tent for hours, listening to the band, peering in through gaps. They plan to go on the Saturday afternoon, when his father is playing cricket. His mother makes it an outing for the three of them. But at the ticket booth she hears with a shock the high Saturday afternoon prices … She does not have enough money with her. She buys tickets for him and his brother. 'Go in, I'll wait here,' she says. He is unwilling, but she insists. (47)

According to Attridge's viewpoint, in this excerpt using the present tense underlines the narrated events and their instantaneousness and further disavows any retrospection. Thus the narrative voice is detached from the narrated consciousness by informing the reader this is a totally different person and that what one is reading is an *autre*biography rather than autobiographical. It is only in recounting when, in 1965, he went to the University of Texas as

a graduate student that Coetzee says "*he* now begins to feel closer to *I*: *autre*biography shades back into autobiography" (*Doubling the Point* 394 italics in original). For this reason, *Boyhood* has similarities with Coetzee's other works of fiction in which "the reader is refused the comfort of a metanarrative level or perspective from which authorial judgments (here, judgment on his earlier self) could be made" (Attridge 143). It becomes clear then that the readers alone are responsible for their appreciation of the boy making them inextricably bound to the work. *Boyhood* is without the traces of traditional confessional writing and the author eludes the self-reflexivity so central to the genre.

Articulating the truth about the author's past life is not quintessentially determining in a book of this nature. The confessional-directed work does not have to be read as artless because the feat of weaving together memory and recollections from experience into effective sentences and ensuing pages of creativity already entails interplay between the writing self and the earlier self. The reader is left with indications to discover the truth which makes the reading process much more powerful and alluring. Attridge maintains that *Boyhood* "signals that the author has no interest in *making a case*, in convincing the reader of the unimpeachability of his motives … [it suggests] a subtlety of self-reflection beyond the scope of most autobiographies" (148 italics in original). Yet it remains to be shown if John's self-examination actually resembles the sort expected in confessional writing because throughout the novel his boyish secrets and his awareness to shame are depicted in a fictional mode rather than as a confession. He is ashamed for not conforming to the so-called normality of childhood:

> The very idea of being beaten makes him squirm with shame. There is nothing he will not do to save himself from it. In this respect he is unnatural and knows it. He comes from an unnatural and shameful family in which not only are children not beaten but older people are addressed by their first names and no one goes to church and shoes are worn every day. (6)

Boyhood impressively suggests that political conviction has less to do with ethics than with the sense of style and the shape of desire. When asked by his schoolmates whether he likes the USA or the USSR, John chooses the Russians just as he chose the Romans "because he likes the letter *r*, particularly the capital *R*, the strongest of all the letters" (27). He despairs at the National Party victory in the 1948 general elections not because it established apartheid but it meant "Dr Malan's first act … [was] to ban all Captain Marvel and Superman comics, allowing only comics with animal characters" (70), and in history class he sides with the British in the Boer war because they "march[ed] to their death to the skirl of bagpipes" (67).

More serious and more sober seem the circumstances John describes as he relates his feelings of embarrassment when interacting with black South Africans of the Cape. One might presume that he is uncomfortable with the deep-seated prejudice and intolerance of the white apartheid regime just as his adult self is. Nonetheless, there are times when the boy does not even dispute the prevailing racist thinking:

> One can dismiss the Natives, perhaps, but one cannot dismiss the Coloured people. The natives can be argued away because they are latecomers, invaders from the north, and have no right to be here … They have been brought here because they do not drink, as Coloured men do, because they can do heavy labour under a blazing sun where lighter, more volatile Coloured men would collapse. They are men without women, without children, who arrive from nowhere and can be made to disappear into nowhere. (61-62)

It seems that the passage is a confession of the inevitability of submitting to the strong ideological apparatus at work at the time, which the boy, without realising it, has perceived as normal, within the State's approved normalcy standards. Attridge therefore holds that "Coetzee's text is in no sense an apology for his internalized prejudices, nor does it attempt to take any credit for the moments of resistance to apartheid ideology. There is no ulterior motive at work that we can fathom" (153). John and his brother usually steal the orders the errand boy Josias delivers when their mother is away and then blame it on him:

> The man from Schochat's, the delivery boy, is a Native … His name is Josias … When his [John's] mother is not at home, he and his brother receive the order … If there is condensed milk, they appropriate it as booty … they pretend that there was no condensed milk, or that Josias stole it. (63)

Despite the protagonist's inhabiting the ingrained racism, his treatment of Josias exhibits a more overarching prejudice which strikes the reader as unconscious.

The story of *Boyhood* nonetheless is primarily internal and acutely about self-consciousness which every so often lingers on personal memory. One of these instances occurs in an event of pure cruelty involving John and his brother when visiting a farmyard:

> There they came upon a mealie-grinding machine. He persuaded his brother to put his hand down the funnel where the mealie-pits were thrown in; then he turned the handle. For an instance, before he stopped, he could feel the fine bones of the fingers being crushed … Their hosts rushed them all to the hospital, where a doctor amputated half the middle finger of his brother's left hand … He was six years old. (119)

This particularly disturbing episode happens not in the present tense, but in the past tense, narrating an incident that occurred three years before, although it still remains powerful up to

the writing experience. After reading this passage the reader is expecting some sort of confessional mood that will express the narrator's extreme hatred or his desire for relentless violence, or rather shame and then retaliation, but one finds out that "he has never apologized to his brother, nor has he ever been reproached with what he did. Nevertheless, the memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding" (119).

Coetzee uses the third person and the present tense in *Boyhood* in an undertaking simply to tell that which is true. The truth the novel strives to purvey is especially that of testimony; an almost strangled account of the author's upbringing in a struggling white middle-class family during the post-war years in South Africa. *Boyhood* ultimately combines two literary traditions of the memoir where one recounts the general truths about the experience, whereas the other represents the singularities of an extraordinary boy within the transcultural contact zone of the English and Afrikaans cultures. *Boyhood* is above all a literary work so it is not marked out for its presentation of historical correctness and precision even though it may also be considered, to some extent, a documentary work. Fiction has, nonetheless, an interest in exploiting to the fullest the experience of truth-telling by verbalising characters' consciousnesses which must appear to remain accurate and honest. Coetzee's *Boyhood* acts out the truth of confession and also writing as confession because according to Coetzee

> Confession is one component in a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution. Absolution means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation front the oppression of the memory. Absolution in this sense is therefore the indispensable goal of all confession. (*Doubling the Point* 251-252)

It is reasonable then that Coetzee has written that South African literature is precisely what one would expect from people living in prison. On the one hand this is undoubtedly a condemnation of South Africa, burdened by years of bitter isolation, self-hatred and profound inner divisions. But on the other hand, it is a revealing comment from the writer whose allegorical novels have marked him as the most original figure in South African literature. Forces of politics and history are never far from the surface in Coetzee's work. The young boy seems to feel nothing as he watches a servant boy being mercilessly beaten: "He peered into the observatory once while it was going on. Trevelyan was holding Eddie by the two wrists and flogging him on the bare legs with a leather strap" (74). Yet we know that John believes the only reason he exceeds at school is his fear of being caned by the teachers. Like a prisoner, John thinks only of his own survival, imaging that if he ever meets Eddie later in life "one

thing he knows for sure: Eddie will have no pity on him" (77). In *Boyhood* the reader at last learns something about the prison the notoriously private Coetzee has inhabited. The novel's leitmotif of drab suburban homes, an alcoholic and distant father whose business career is decaying, an overly long-suffering mother, and their roots in the pre-industrial countryside would have become routine autobiography if placed in the hands of an ordinary writer.

Some years later Coetzee re-enacts the emotional struggles and his views on racism and politics in South Africa which began in his childhood (*Boyhood*) with the publication of *Youth* (2002). This second experimental memoir depicts events from 1959 when John – the central character now a grown up – leaves South Africa for London through the early 1960s. In both volumes of the memoir Coetzee depicts himself from a distance, and once again in *Youth* he uses a detached third-person narrator who reports circumstances of his own past in the present tense. He writes about his past self, both the boy and the youth, as *autre*, an unknown other who is a continuing presence. In *Youth*, Coetzee defines the young man's motives for flight from his family and the burdens of apartheid, but he is firstly concerned with the youth's behaviour and awareness when arriving in England. The blighted youth expects to achieve artistic and psychosexual fulfilment in London, which he perceives as a romanticised centre of modernism. He is following the path of early twentieth-century writers such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, whom Coetzee has described in *Stranger Shores* (2001) as "particularly young colonials struggling to match their inherited culture to their daily experience" (7). In *Stranger Shores* Coetzee goes over Eliot's earlier work and further defines him as a modernist who distanced himself from America to claim a destiny, denoting a

> brand of internationalism or cosmopolitanism … as a pioneer and indeed a kind of prophet; a claiming of identity, furthermore, in which a new and hitherto unsuspected paternity is asserted – a line of descent … a line in which the Eliots are an eccentric offshoot of the great Virgil-Dante line. (7)

This means an alternative to his actual provincial history in America. In *Youth*, Coetzee reports making a physical divide from his provincial past, just as Eliot leaves America. The memoir exemplifies Coetzee's belief that

> Historical understanding is understanding of the past as a shaping force upon the present … Our historical being is past of our present. It is that part of our present … that we cannot fully understand, since it requires us to understand ourselves not only as objects of historical forces but as subjects of our own historical self-understanding. (*Stranger Shores* 15)

In England, this provincial artist's anxiety results, in part, from the discovery that he is dispossessed of certainty in his relation to literature and culture. His anxieties and hopes concerning his move to London are explicit early in the narrative.

In the opening chapter of *Youth,* one sees the protagonist's daily experiences in South Africa. He is supporting himself in Cape Town with several part-time jobs while finishing his undergraduate studies. He has moved away from his family home, therefore detaching himself and further accentuating feelings of dispossession. First, the reader is told in a single-sentence paragraph that, by moving away from Worcester, "he is proving something: that each man is an island; that you don't need parents" (3). The assertion that he is "proving something" seems conceited, and further, it reverses John Donne's famous aphorism of interconnectedness that says, "No man is an island." The character's sentiments reach their sharpness when he generalises from his personal flight to an argument that "you don't need parents." In fact, two short paragraphs later, a barrier to the youth's achieving of maturing is identified as a hidden childish weakness: "There is something essential he lacks, some definition of feature. Something of the baby still lingers in him. How long before he will cease to be a baby? What will cure him of babyhood, make him into a man?" (3). The youth's efforts to label that "something essential" which is missing from his personality is one of the major issues throughout the novel. He states that "only love and art are, in his opinion, worthy of giving oneself to without reserve" (85). Though, when any specific and actual woman such as Jacqueline, Sarah, Caroline, Marianne, or Astrid shows interest in him, he is unable to comprehend why she might prefer him. Fearing the encroachments on his freedom by these lady lovers, he however believes that in finding "the right woman [she] will see through the opaque surface he presents to the world, to the depths inside, the right woman will unlock the hidden intensities of passion in him. Until that woman arrives, until that day of destiny, he is merely passing the time" (134). Only then will he have achieved passionate maturity as a man and as an artist. Such fantasies of escape from himself appear over the length of the memoir and they stand as his boyish evasions of his emotions.

It appears that John's efforts towards poetic expression are impoverished because "he has a horror of spilling mere emotion on to the page" (61). He reiterates that he is cold and unresponsive, and shows "a moral sickness: meanness, poverty of spirit, no different in its essence from his coldness with women" (95). Such restricted access to his emotions is further exemplified in the youth's crude generalisations defining intellectual or artistic values which he has derived from stories concerning the lives of artists. John says, for example, that "the artist

must taste all experience, from the noblest to the most degraded. Just as is the artist's destiny to experience the most supreme creative joy, so he must be prepared to take upon himself all in life that is miserable, squalid, ignominious" (164). And some women in particular, those like Jacqueline, give themselves to artists so that they can recognise "the secret flame burning in him, the flame that marks him as an artist" (5). These generalisations mask the individual contents of events defining his relationships with women and himself. Derek Attridge outlines the confessional mood of *Youth* when he contends that Coetzee's novel is "an unflinching admission of the faults of self-centeredness, cruelty, ineptitude, and callousness – most painfully evident in a series of disastrous sexual encounters … these failings are born mainly out of naiveté, timidity, and an agonizing incapacity to open himself to others" (158). Although John's perspective on the subject of sex and women is partly deluded, his actual encounters are always troublesome, which provokes awkwardness and shame in the young man whose confession then makes more sense. When a partner in Cape Town asks him to help her get an abortion he confesses taking part in an undignified scheme:

> He gets one of them pregnant. When she telephones to break the news, he is astonished, floored … Now that disaster has struck, she does not hide away in her room pretending nothing is wrong. On the contrary, she has found out what needs to be found out – how to get an abortion in Cape Town – and has made the necessary arrangements. In fact, she has put him to shame. (32-33)

Later on in the novel John regrets an affair he had with Astrid, an Austrian au pair working in London. He acknowledges "he has made a mistake, already he knows it. He feels no desire … He pretends to like having her there, but the truth is he does not" (84).

John's heartlessness is especially apparent in his seduction and subsequent neglect of Marianne, a South African college student who is visiting London with his cousin, Ilse. After sleeping with Marianne, he is disgusted by the sheets and the bloodied mattress, and he is thoughtless in sending her home in a taxi and then forgetting to phone her. He knows "he has behaved dishonourably, no doubt about that, behaved like a cad … he will punish himself, and in return will hope the story of his caddish behaviour will not get out" (130). As John thinks over the episode and how it fits in his life story, he wonders whether "the depths that he has wanted to plum have been within him all the time, closed up in his chest: depths of coldness, callousness, caddishness" (131). Love affairs described in the narrative have a recurring bleak emptiness and lack of passion. In a love affair after moving from his parents' house, for example, his relationship with the volatile Jacqueline collapses after she studies his

diary: "Jacqueline searches out his diary and reads what he has written about their life together. He returns to find her packing her belongings" (8). The youth is not sure whether he left it around so that she would find it or if she has invaded his creative privacy. Jacqueline's outraged departure leads him to reflect on the issue of truthfulness in his dairy. John, as a writer, is left to consider if it is wise to allow his sentiments to go into the diary, or if he should cover and hide them from language: "If he is to censor … ignoble emotions – resentment at having his flat invaded, or shame at his own failures as a lover – how will those emotions ever be transfigured and turned into poetry? … Besides, who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings" (9-10). Questions relating to the uncensored revelations in his diary are pertinent to the memoir itself. His relationships with women are almost entirely narrated as selfish, unfulfilling, and even dishonourable. Attridge argues that

> The power of this exposure of the self, of this drive for truth, can be felt only if the author of the words we read is identified with the "he" of the narrative … many of the episodes are private and thus beyond any possibility of confirmation or disconfirmation, and any comments Coetzee himself might make … could always be part of a deliberate strategy of deception. (161)

Apparently Coetzee has stitched together fictional scenes from his past into the genre of autobiography drafted in *Boyhood* and which runs over into *Youth* in order to "give the whole the aura that will get it onto the shelves and thus into the history of the world: the aura of truth" (*Youth* 138).

Autobiography is a genre known to linger invariably at the boundaries of the literary and the non-literary, and confession thus is staged in the same way. Coetzee sums up his techniques when he writes that "the phrases [should be] *is staged*, *is heard*; not *should be staged*, *should be heard*. There is no ethical imperative that I claim access to … the book is written … nothing can stop it. The deed is done, what power was available to me is exercised" (*Doubling the Point* 250 italics in original). So *Boyhood* and *Youth* as memoirs are no exception in this sense of staging, which only benefits from fictionality because it them becomes of interest to readers. These two works were not intended, at first glance, to be read as the ultimate dispensers of forgiveness and blame, they are rather arranging for the readers some sort of truth-telling whose status is uncertain. In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee talks about truth and self-serving fiction, in which the desire for truth is deferred in favour of a desire for it to be a certain way. He writes:

> The more coherent such a hypothetical fiction of the self might be, the less the reader's chance of knowing whether it is a true confession. We can test its truth when it contradicts itself or comes into conflict with some "outer", verifiable truth, both of which eventualities a careful confessing narrator can in theory avoid. (280)

If the question, "Who am I" impels the writing of an autobiography then Coetzee's answer identifies three interwoven influences: political structures, artistic models, and personal emotional needs. In all these sources of self-definition, however, John is experiencing anxieties of dispossession. His experiences in England do not lead him towards a personal liberation from anxiety. In fact, in England as a foreigner, he discovers a deeper personal loneliness which is heightened even more because he works with computers in weapons research. He discusses the terror he lives in England during the Cold War and the irony of escaping from the oppressors of South Africa to the position of "siding with the Americans, who behave like bullies in Europe and all over the world" (84). In these terms, Coetzee's anxiety articulates a cold and gloomy moroseness derived from his artistic aspirations and inhibitions stemming from home.

3. The autobiography masquerade in Elizabeth Costello

Notoriously wary of confessions, public-author appearances and interviews, Coetzee, after writing his third-person memoirs and *Disgrace*, has been giving Elizabeth Costello's lessons as lectures in public presentations, guarding his own voice in her beliefs and arguments. When Coetzee delivered his "The Philosophers and the Animals" in Princeton this was not the first time he has resorted to the figure of Elizabeth Costello, though she did not become well-known until after *The Lives of Animals* was published. He delivered a lecture at Bennington College in November 1996 under the title "What is Realism?" which had a similar framework as in "The Lives of Animals." Coetzee reclaimed the Costello fictions again in 1998 at the University of California, Berkeley at the Townsend Center for the Humanities. This time he placed Costello aboard a ship where she entertains the crew and passengers with a talk on "The Future of the Novel," but the lecture, entitled "The Novel in Africa," is actually focused on a paper by Emmanuel Egudu, a fictional Nigerian novelist. South Africa and the AIDS crisis are a move in location and discussion as Coetzee reads "The Humanities in Africa" in March 2001 at Siemens Stiftung in Munich. This lesson is about Costello's sister Blanche who runs a makeshift hospital in the heart of Zululand where people struggle with

those infected with HIV. In this lesson there is also a debate over the humanities and the role of academia. In June 2002 Coetzee offered in Holland at the Nexus Conference on "Evil" a self-referential presentation in which he presented a fictional narrative of Costello's participation in a conference on the same subject.

The ideas Costello wants to propose in her lectures are so intense and extreme that they urge the reader to retrace their arguments to Coetzee himself. Instead of merely play-acting the arguments, he makes them vigorously and cogently. In his article entitled "A Frog's Life" James Wood asserts that "Coetzee seems to be playing his usual withholding game: the famous ascetic, the pale unbeliever, the non-interviewee, who instead of tying himself to a series of propositions puts them in the mouth of a fictional creation and slips away behind her." The device of lecture-narratives used in *Elizabeth Costello* "is much more complicated than the mere evasion of idea-ownership. For a start, Coetzee's framing device does not so much evade as self-incriminate" (Wood). In turning to Costello and to fiction over orthodox argumentation, Coetzee is undoubtedly speaking up for and supporting the literary. Wood writes about the vulnerability of the ideas that circulate in *Elizabeth Costello* because they assume literary form in the novel and thus they can never be won. Despite this sort of literary argumentation and its vincibility, the ideas which are put forward are still traceable and the lessons in *Elizabeth Costello* remain skilfully framed. The novel has a resonant confessional tone to it according to James Wood, who affirms that "far from being evasive, I think that Coetzee is passionately confessing, and that his entire book vibrates with confession." Costello's attitude towards autobiography resonates with that which Coetzee proposes in *Doubling the Point*. During the radio interview Costello staunchly declares that "of course we draw upon our own lives all the time – they are our main resource, in a sense our only resource" (12). It appears that the effect of the narrative is to produce empathy with the protagonist and to suggest she is ambiguously vocalising Coetzee's views. The chain of events in the novel is for the most part perceived by John – which happens to be Coetzee's own first name. The relationship between Costello and John does provide a potentially interesting point of tension, with the son serving as mentor, caregiver and shadow. He loves her, resents her, and argues with her.

In her book *Autobiography* Linda Anderson addresses several issues that renowned critic Carolyn Heilbrun poses in her work *Writing a Woman's Life*. Anderson mentions how Heilbrun has written about the four approaches in writing a woman's life. Heilbrun says a woman's life may be told by the woman herself as an autobiography; it may be told in what

she might deem fiction; she may allow a biographer – man or woman – to write her life; or she may record her own life in advance without naming the process. And Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* is a hybrid of the first three hypotheses proffered by Heilbrun. In the novel there is a woman who speaks and writes about herself, John who intervenes as his mother's foil mirroring the actual narrator's voice, and there is Coetzee (a man), the biographer, who fictionalises her life and calls it fiction. Estelle Jelinek, another feminist critic, has gone further to contrast the autobiographies of women and men on various points. Men distance themselves in autobiographies that are focused on their professional lives and success stories (10), while women stress personal and domestic issues and write about relationships (10). Men are used to aggrandising themselves by idealising "their lives or cast[ing] them into heroic moulds to project their universal import" (14-15). By contrast, women seek stories which reveal a self-consciousness and analyse their lives so as to find explanations, looking to mask their feelings and concealing aspects of their lives (15). Linearity, harmony, and orderliness are, according to Jelinek, characteristics which shape the events in men's lives, unlike the irregularity in women's texts which have a "disconnected, fragmentary … pattern of diffusion and diversity" (17). For Jelinek, the everyday quality of women's lives is transposed to their narratives because their writings are "analogous to the fragmentary, interrupted, and formless nature of their lives" (19).

Elizabeth Costello is very much her own story, an intellectual and highly mordacious picaresque storyline which progresses towards self-knowledge and belief. Authors of fictional works do not discover their characters from an established set of abstract and possible objects. One's general understanding of storytelling depends on perceiving authors to be genuinely creative. What readers admire about certain authors is their ability to invent sympathetic and intricate characters instead of ordinary cut-outs. In a book under the title *Fiction and Metaphysics*, Amie Lynn Thomasson holds that "we describe authors as inventing their characters, making them up, or creating them, so that before being written about by an author, there is no fictional object" (6). The creation of a certain fictional character is tied to a specific time and to its particular origin in the work of a writer or writers of a special literary tradition. Readers have acknowledged that characters do not have any spatiotemporal location making them abstract in that sense. Thus they are described as a kind of abstract artefact. Thomasson alleges that "dominant theories of reference of names have emphasized that names … function by means of a direct reference to their objects, and that causal and historical circumstances play an essential role in our ability to refer to objects by name" (43). But due to

the infinite possibilities that a reader can infer from the description of a character in a novel, it becomes a complicated task to single out a real of a possible individual. "There is," Thomasson adds, "no baptism process for fictional characters, but only that it must be conceived of differently than that for spatiotemporal objects" (47). As the author uses the name of a character in the narrative it becomes an indexical indication to the character throughout the book. Amie Thomasson mentions that "often the use of a name in conjunction with words describing the character being written itself constitutes an "official" baptism of the character … so that the very use of the name in the text constitutes a naming ceremony, or at least an official and public record thereof" (47-48). This intratextual naming process can happen at any stage of the writing process, from the first steps of introducing and developing the protagonist, through to the final stages. There is no conventional rule, however, which stipulates that a character's naming should have to be recorded in the text by the author. Various fictional objects are left unnamed in the text and there are countless examples in literature. In the case of *Elizabeth Costello* the author introduces his protagonist in one short biographical paragraph on the first page of the novel and then goes on to retrace her literary accomplishments. When a fictional name is "conferred on a fictional entity … [it] is then used in a chain of communication, much like proper names of ordinary people" (Thomasson 49). This seems to be the case of Coetzee's fiction and especially those most recent lectures, essays and novels which make up the series of Costello narratives.

To disregard how much Costello's story dovetails with Coetzee's is however quite unfeasible. Costello and Coetzee are roughly the same age. He is a South African who has left his country for Australia; she is an Australian. They have both received many awards. They both despise the trappings of celebrity. Costello becomes ill with exhaustion each time she has to fly around the world to get a prize. Coetzee usually refuses to attend such occasions. And a brief reference to John's childhood has echoes of the boy in *Boyhood* and *Youth*:

> For as far back as he can remember, his mother has secluded herself in the mornings to do her writing. He used to think of himself as a misfortunate child, lonely and unloved … he and his sister used to slump outside the locked door and make tiny whining sounds … the whining would change to humming or singing, and they would feel better, forgetting their forsakenness. (*Elizabeth Costello* 4)

There are literary correlations too. John says of her writing: "She shakes him … For she is by no means a comforting writer. She is even cruel" (5). That is the same about Coetzee's fiction because he places his protagonists in opposition to an oppressive or anarchic state, and then

subjects them to the ruthless circumstances possible – starvation, imprisonment, homelessness, terminal illness, social disgrace and sexual slavery. Similarly to *Boyhood* and *Youth*, Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* redefines and opens up a renewed dimension to the term *autre*biography that he has deemed an immanent part of his fiction writing. Early on in the narrative the author abandons the conventional narrative style when he blatantly discards the narratological past tense and first person: "In the spring of 1995 Elizabeth Costello travelled, or travels (present tense henceforth), to Williamstown … On her visit to Pennsylvania Elizabeth Costello … is accompanied by her son John" (2). The "present tense henceforth" in brackets forewarns the reader that s/he is now entering Coetzee's inventive and thought-provoking world of writing. The new approach to *autre*biography which *Elizabeth Costello* epitomises clearly presupposes a different look on the Other or a Coetzean impression about alterity. Among the similarities and divergences between, on the one hand *Youth* and *Boyhood*, and on the other *Elizabeth Costello*, one might agree that Coetzee has now chosen an ageing Australian white woman as his protagonist to exemplify his ideas.

Feminine protagonists nonetheless have appeared throughout his oeuvre – *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Foe*, and *Age of Iron* – but always as empowered narrators of the text and also as authors of them. Some critics of Coetzee's work contend that he uses the feminine as a textual strategy to elude some rhetorical devices and to inhabit others. It seems he, like Mrs Curren, prefers his readers to see his writing as a deceitful discourse, and encourages readers, as Mrs Curren does in *Age of Iron*, to "read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye" (104). Coetzee tries to see his own fiction and his writing position equally objectively which again supports the idea that his work is self-reflexive. Critics have noted Coetzee's commitment to *écriture féminine* when he utilises tropes linked to the feminine. In this sense, Fiona Probyn says "not only is feminist criticism an important feature of Coetzee's work, but so are the feminine metaphors associated with fluidity, maternity, silence, weaving and the body" (Probyn). Furthermore, critics have identified a "difference feminism" in his novels. Probyn affirms "this is because critics predominantly read Coetzee's use of feminism as an *unproblematic* expression of Coetzee's own 'self-positioning'" (Probyn italics in original). In the "Afterword" to the collection *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee* David Attwell writes about the insufficiency of feminist readings of Coetzee's fiction and goes on to assert that he brings into play feminism in order to express and write his self-positioning. Atwell states:

> First the question of the feminine narrators has been insufficiently explored. Feminist readings of Coetzee have been slow to develop, perhaps because Coetzee seems in an immediate way to

> be a powerful ally of feminism: Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren are … seeking to define themselves in worlds not of their own making … The feminine in these narrators … serves to dramatise Coetzee's own self positioning with respect to the versions of authority both social and discursive … In other words, here we have the feminine as a sign for other kinds of difference. (215)

Notwithstanding this, Attwell agrees and endorses a notion of feminism which sees itself as well-suited for broaching issues that unfold beyond specifically women's issues. Although Coetzee resorts to feminine writers and uses the feminine in his fiction, he is not so much interested in the feminist perspective as he is intrigued with the position of women. "Far from being 'swallowed up' by feminism, however, Coetzee has been *enabled* by it" (Probyn italics in original). His attention is focused on femininity and its textual enunciations, women's place in representation, as a writer, and her power to obtain literacy.

The question that remains is how Coetzee's readers are supposed to take Costello's abrasiveness. One should indubitably see Coetzee lurking behind it, hiding his own more unpalatable ideas in fiction. He has always been a novelist of embodied ideas made palpable because he is a resolute allegorist. Linda Anderson debates that self-knowledge rests on figurative language and tropes. In addition, she writes:

> Autobiographies thus produce fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek. What the author of an autobiography does is to try to endow his inscription within the text with all the attributes of a face in order to mask or conceal his own fictionalization or displacement by writing. (13)

Ironically, prosopopeia stands for the defacement of the autobiographical self through figurative speech because ultimately all that matters is writing. Taking Anderson's view, one might say that *Elizabeth Costello* meets the criteria she has proposed. So, one could take into consideration that *Elizabeth Costello*, in literary terms, is an autobiographical masquerade. The masque (a variant spelling of "mask") was inaugurated in the Renaissance, and in its full development, it was an elaborate form of court entertainment and stage spectacle. The speaking characters, who wore masks, were often played by amateur actors who belonged to courtly society. The play concluded with a dance in which the players doffed their masks and were joined by the audience. Elizabeth Costello is Coetzee's disguise and the lecture halls and conference rooms are his stages where he performs.

All this metaphorical play-acting gestures towards what Teresa Dovey has called "the notion of the *divided* subject of Lacan, the split between text and narration, or utterance and enunciation" (57). Dovey further maintains that Coetzee's "novels … may be described as

postmodern allegories, which undermine the authority of the appropriated discourses. Their self-reflexive gestures … [allow] one to see them as speech acts, which erect an identity in writing on behalf of the speaker" (57). In a short piece entitled "A Note on Writing" in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee elaborates on a mode of writing, which is in essence his own mode of writing in the middle voice:

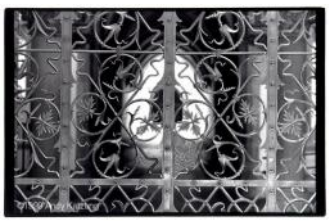
> The phantom presence of a middle voice … can be felt in some senses of modern verbs if one is alert to the possibility of a threefold opposition active-middle-passive. 'To write' is one of these verbs. To write (active) is to carry out the action without reference to the self, perhaps, though not necessarily, on behalf of someone else. To write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do writing) with reference to the self. (94)

Readers comprehend the degree to which Coetzee is writing out of his own preoccupations as do all writers. To read the figure (masque) of Elizabeth Costello as a novelist who might pose self-referential ironies in the writings about herself is simply a belittlement of the novel. She is to Coetzee a means towards thoughtful self-examination and, moreover, a marker of the obligations and attractions that a literary writer constantly faces.

Of course, there is a prolonged leap in time between the stories of Magda, Mrs Curren, and Susan Barton and Elizabeth Costello, but Coetzee's writing principles are still contemporary as ever. Though the feminine in *Elizabeth Costello* does not denote a feminine narrative voice, there is nonetheless posited an ample and substantial feminist criticism which has evolved around her publications over the years. Issues arising from feminist studies have considerable importance in the novel because Costello speaks her mind on some of the issues in the lectures attributed to her, and even more so when they are transcribed word for word into the lessons, despite being abridged at certain points when the narrator chooses to do so.

Costello's most important points on the lives of animals, on authorship and the humanities are highlighted in Coetzee's novel through this protagonist. She embodies and staunchly states her beliefs in public unlike the previous characters in Coetzee's other novels, in which Costello's major points or ones that are related to them are already dealt with but in third-person narratives. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth* are certainly fictional memoirs which nevertheless epitomise the act of writing, but *Elizabeth Costello* seems to go a step further in the direct presentation of argued beliefs such as those concerning the rights of animals, the role of the Humanities and the nature of Eros in particular.

A writer's life – Embodying beliefs about believing



1. The classics and Elizabeth Costello: The lives of animals, the humanities, and Eros

In 2003 Coetzee reprinted *The Lives of Animals* inside *Elizabeth Costello*, alongside other episodes in which Costello performs, or states her case, or answers for her beliefs. There are three new pieces, which include two final lessons, "Eros" and "At the Gate," which do not use the lecture format consistent with the previous chapters, and the "Postscript" in the form of a letter. *Elizabeth Costello* might be understood by Coetzee's more avid readers as a way into his earlier fictions and essays because it crystallises questions about the intellectual practices throughout his writing. Here he apparently turns inward to reflect on the process of making up stories, of creating characters to embody ideas, and Costello comes to be a metacharacter – creator and creation both. In his *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* Derek Attridge maintains that "we may surmise that Coetzee had no long-term plan when writing these early Costello pieces of combining them into something on a larger scale" (194). However, the issue of animal suffering, which engrosses two whole lessons in *Elizabeth Costello*, was already alluded to in the episode about the chained dog, "a dog, grey and emaciated, begins to lope up and down the jetty, whining eagerly" (7) in *The Master of Petersburg*, and the same delineation appeared again years later in *Disgrace* (1999). Coetzee's opinion on the matter can be approached directly in his interview with Attwell in *Doubling the Point*:

> Let me add … that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so. (248)

And many are aware of Coetzee's vegetarianism, which he seems to make clear as Costello expresses her vegetarianism too while affirming her views on animal rights and humankind's ethics towards animals.

Costello's militant support of the lives of animals which the narrator in *Elizabeth Costello* describes as "a hobbyhorse of hers, animals" (60) is consistent with her eating habits "because Elizabeth does not like to see meat on the table" (60). During a dinner party, after her lecture, when asked if her vegetarianism comes out of moral conviction, she answers that "it comes out of a desire to save my soul" (89). This debate though is far from the serious controversy and amazement she caused when she compared the likeness of the production of meat to the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis, as she asserts, "we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end" (65). Hers is the voice

of accusation because she portrays the events of the death camps in these terms: "They went like sheep to the slaughter. They died like animals … The crime of the Third Reich … was to treat people like animals" (64-65). After attending her lecture, Abraham Stern, a senior member of the faculty and renowned poet, in a note of dissent, explains his absence from the dinner party in protest contending, "if Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead" (94). Unfortunately Stern's letter is not the last in a series of contentious views about Costello's human-animal relations as she is further critiqued because of her talk. When returning home to Australia she finds that the newspapers have accused her of anti-Semitism and have ridiculed her lecture in their articles. Costello is vexed by "journalists, for the most part, but strangers too, including a nameless woman who shouted down the line, 'You Fascist bitch!'" (157).

Similarly at home, Costello lives up to her moral principle of defending the lives of animals since according to John, "if she wants to open her heart to animals, why can't she stay home and open it to her cats?" (12). John's thought is the only indication in the novel that actually points to Costello having pets. Now this passage reminds us of "a house of cats" (12), that of Mrs Curren, in *Age of Iron*, who feeds the stray cats and even gets upset with them. Further on Mrs Curren describes her feelings as she sees the beginning of "the slaughtering, the plucking and cleaning, the freezing of thousands of carcasses, the packing of thousands of heads and feet … So hard and yet so easy, killing, dying" (42). She knew she should have driven off as soon as she saw what was about to happen, but she stayed, fascinated with the slaughter. Those images remained even though she tried to forget the event. This singular circumstance clearly distances Costello from Mrs Curren in their unambiguous obstinate positions despite their differences. Through the power of imagination and in terms of Elizabeth Costello's imperatives, the reader meditates on the suffering of animals at human hands. A great deal of the discussion in Costello's case is in a homely arena with her daughter-in-law, Norma, who is a specialist in the philosophy of mind and considers that her mother-in-law's "books are overrated, that her opinions on animals, animal consciousness and ethical relations with animals are jejune and sentimental" (61). Both women evidently have not got along ever since John and Norma's marriage and hostilities usually break out when Costello visits them. Nevertheless, the point of view Costello manifests is precisely what one would expect from a literary writer, who is not strictly bound to the rationale of science and whose standpoint as an artist allows and embraces frankness and poetic licence. However, she proves

she has read numerous scientific studies, and she quotes them in her lectures, despite being ultimately more immersed in the literary world of allegory and imagination.

The protagonist draws on two important literary sources, which are Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and a Franz Kafka short story entitled "A Report for an Academy," in order to argue for a more humane treatment of animals. In his article "Between Swift and Kafka," Richard A. Barney states that

> For Costello, Jonathan Swift's story about the legendary Lemuel Gulliver dramatizes a logical impasse that consigns human beings to the fate of irrational self-debasement … What interests me here are two things in Costello's analysis of Swift's story: first, her introduction of a colonial subtext, and second, her strategy of complicating Gulliver's – and also Swift's – impossibly dualistic worldview. (18)

In her lecture Costello remarks that

> What has always puzzled me about *Gulliver's Travels* … is that Gulliver always travels … but he does not come ashore with an armed party, as happened in reality, and Swift's book says nothing about … expeditions to colonize Lilliput or the island of the Houyhnhmns.
>
> The question I ask is: What if Gulliver and an armed expedition were to land, shoot a few Yahoos when they became threatening, and then shoot and eat a horse, for food? What would that do to Swift's somewhat too neat, somewhat too disembodied, somewhat too unhistorical fable? (102)

The history of colonialism undeniably supplies the missing third term which undermines Swift's false dichotomy. Coetzee is exposing Swift's entrenched dualism through Costello, who alleges that "*Gulliver's Travels* seems to me to operate within the three-part Aristotelian division of gods, beasts and men. As long as one tries to fit the three actors into just two categories … one can't make sense of the fable" (102). Richard Barney avers that Coetzee, by contrast with Swift, is "persistently interested in exploring other possibilities that can at least provisionally elude the rigid binary oppositions often inherent in thinking since the Enlightenment" (19). For Barney, Coetzee believes that Swift sustains a model of human identity, colonial imperialism, and debates over personal desire, but Kafka "poses the possibility of dismantling that dominant Western cultural edifice … Kafka's [stories are] told in matter-of-fact fashion … tied to vital contexts in the West's sociopolitical history" (19). Although Kafka's Red Peter becomes thoroughly civilised, he occupies a difficult marginal position. He nevertheless embodies a radical critique of Western subjectivity. Kafka's stories involving human characters transforming into animals were aimed "to dismantle completely … to level the psychic field … what seemed to him the prison-house of rationalist Western

identity at least since the philosophy of Descartes" (Barney 19). Costello maintains that "to be alive is to be a living soul. An animal – and we are all animals – is an embodied soul. This is precisely what Descartes saw and, for his own reasons, chose to deny" (78). Again the West's false essentialism appears in *Elizabeth Costello*, as professor of philosophy Thomas O'Hearne alludes briefly to another analogy between animal suffering and humans when he dismisses the animal-rights movement as "another Western crusade against the practices of the rest of the world, claiming universality" (105).

Understanding the lives of animals via the literary seems to suit Elizabeth Costello better than her arguments about philosophy. At least her seminar "The Poets and the Animals" is well-received especially by Norma who is "glad it's on something she knows about. I find her philosophizing rather difficult to take" (91). Within the family, too, there is a parallel debate, between the novelist and the philosopher, Costello and Norma. It is a discussion about the structural relationship between literature and philosophy. And most people in her audience think that here she is much firmer in her beliefs and her arguments are not so volatile. In this chapter Costello explores the kind of connection that human beings can have with animals from the perspective of literary writers, namely Rilke and Ted Hughes. Embodiment is possible, Costello observes, "by bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals … When we read the jaguar poem … we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us" (97-98). Poetic invention or licence is the process that explains this association of living bodies into being, and it all makes sense in remembering Costello's statement that "writers teach us more than they are aware of" (97). In her case, she brings to the lecture "poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him" (96). Readers and the audience are desperately called on to read the poets to comprehend the being of animals, "that is why I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language" (111). In the book's first chapter, John defends his mother against a critic on the grounds that in different novels she has imagined herself into the being of a man and of a dog. It is the exercise of poetic invention and of human sympathy which storytellers, of all people, should have in abundance.

Reading "The Poets and the Animals" reminds one of the philosophical dialogue and Plato, who famously invites the comparison of poet and philosopher. The whole portion of "The Lives of Animals" within *Elizabeth Costello* entails the genres of the lecture-narrative and metafiction, and its effect is to isolate different ideas about animal rights, consciousness,

death, family and academia in opposition to claims of authorship and authority. Through this strategy Coetzee attempts to provoke engagement with the book's ethical issues in a confrontational fashion, as if less direct strategies would not stir readers' attention. His main purpose is not to resolve the philosophical, poetic or psychological implications of these central questions; his is a position of confrontation and reconciliation of competing sensibilities. *Elizabeth Costello* depicts how difficult it is for two morally serious and thoughtful people to sympathise or understand each other's views. The distance between the two ageing writers, Costello and Stern, does not diminish and yet they continue to take each other seriously. Coetzee stirs our imagination by confronting readers with an articulate, intelligent, ageing, and increasingly alienated novelist in areas of complex moral concern.

Alienation, a term which is widely used in sometimes contradictory ways, means, in popular terms, an estrangement from other people, society, or even oneself. Apart from the usual alienation Costello lives through when she hurriedly travels abroad, her trip to South Africa on her sister Blanche's invitation, is so much more estranged and gruelling that it intensifies her alienated position. In "The Humanities in Africa," Lesson 5 of the novel, the reader ultimately understands the disaffected relationship of the two ageing sisters, "she and Blanche were never truly close" (117) to a point where "familiarity. Family resemblance. Two old women in a foreign city, sipping tea, hiding their dismay at each other" (118) paces the personal spheres of the narrative. Blanche was educated in classics and then chose medicine to finally become a nun – Sister Bridget – who is in charge of a rural hospital in Marianhill, Zululand, dedicated to the care of AIDS victims and children born infected. She has achieved worldwide celebrity because of the book she wrote about her project, in which Zulu doctors work beside doctors who practise Western medicine. Like her sister, Blanche has attained distinction and has toured the West giving lectures and raising money for her Order, "famous enough … to be having an honorary degree conferred on her by a university in her adopted country" (116). For the graduation ceremony she is expected to give a speech and this actually surprises Costello and further adds to the family resemblance and echoes Costello's lecture-narratives: "They've asked me to give a talk. Sing for my supper … An address. I am giving an address tomorrow, to the graduands. You will have to sit through it, I am afraid" (118). It is not the first time Costello has swapped over from speaker to audience, but this episode becomes more poignant because she hardly knows what to expect from her missionary sister on this academic occasion.

Blanche's address to the Faculty of Humanities rests mainly on the humanities, about their history and their present situation, and then invokes issues of humanity. She argues that the "*studia humanitatis* or humane studies, studies in man and the nature of man" (120) started with the humanist movement in the Renaissance as an enterprise of textual scholarship focused on the Bible. This led its practitioners to study Greek, which caused them to be seduced by Hellenism, and to relativise the message of Christianity:

> Textual scholarship meant, first, the recovery of the true text, then the true translation … and true translation turned out to be inseparable from true interpretation … from true understanding of the cultural and historical matrix … That is how linguistic studies, literary studies … cultural studies and historical studies – the studies that form the core of the so-called humanities – came to be bound up together … In no time … the study of these texts [Greek antiquity], later to be called the classics, had become an end in itself. (121)

But Blanche maintains that as a philosophy of life Hellenism has failed, and the humanities too: "The *studia humanitatis* … at the end of the second millennium of our era, they are truly on their deathbed" (123). Moreover, Blanche's final arguments determine that the humanities have been overpowered by mechanical reason with the encroachment of the natural sciences, technology and practical arts. Historical indications point to the 1890s when the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey developed a highly influential distinction between the natural sciences, which aim at a reductive but systematic explanation of the world, and the human sciences (the humanities), which aim to achieve an understanding of the world of actual experience – the lived human world, for instance, that is represented in literature. Dilthey's thoughts aligned with the historical awareness of the rapid advance in the breakthroughs of the natural sciences and technology after the Renaissance and stand for what Blanche terms "the monster of reason" (123), an issue she chooses not to go into further in her talk because "that is another story for another day" (123).

After the ceremony, there is a formal luncheon hosted by the faculty and once again, Costello intervenes in the debate, though rather weak and unconvincing at the outset, to argue against her sister's absolutist standing and to defend the power of fiction writing and the humanities. In a conversation with an English professor, Costello points out the classics she read as a student in the 1950s – D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot and Shakespeare – so that "in our truest reading, as students, we searched the page for guidance, guidance in perplexity" (127). She speaks about salvation on two levels which have been for some time interconnected: "If the humanities want to survive, surely it is those energies and that craving for guidance that they must respond to: a craving that is, in the end, a quest for salvation" (127). Her

outspokenness has ousted her and the faculty have recognised her as *the* Elizabeth Costello, and so, as not to offend Blanche in her moment of acknowledgment, Costello feels that she must tread carefully. However, she continues her crusade to watch over the literary artist's life, precisely her own way of life, by affirming "that our readers … come to us with a certain hunger … I would say that it is enough for books to teach us about ourselves … Teaching us about ourselves: what else is that but *studium humanitatis*?" (127-128). Costello is puzzled with Blanche's hostility towards the humanities and fiction in general when she says "I do not need to consult novels" (128), and Costello even ponders whether this antagonism is not actually pointed at her, via Blanche's not being "an aficionado of the humanities" (131).

Blanche's belief that she does not need to rely on novels to understand and perceive human pettiness, baseness, and cruelty abides with her Catholicism and her insistence that suffering is the authentic human experience: "To the people who come to Marianhill I promise nothing except that we will help them bear their cross" (141). Costello only visits the hospital out of a sense of duty because it is not something she wants, "she has not the stomach for it … the stick limbs, the bloated bellies, the great impassive eyes of children wasting away, beyond cure, beyond care" (133). During her visit Costello finds that suffering also resides in the carved wooden crucifixes laid out in the chapel and on the hospital walls. She hates these Gothic representations of a dying Christ rather than a living Christ, she dislikes the way they carve "the face of the tortured man … [in] a formalized, simplified mask in a single plane, the eyes slits, the mouth heavy and drooping. The body … copied, she would guess, from some European model" (135). Blanche tells Costello that a local Zulu carver, named Joseph, ironically, has made these crucifixes and he has been paid wages and given a workshop so that he could dedicate his working life to carving crucifixes. All Costello is left with is to question her sister: "still, might it not have been wiser to encourage him to expand his horizon a little?" (137), by not remaining a simple artisan because "he was denied a fuller life, specifically an artist's life" (137). The issue of humanity and beauty resurfaces in the conversation over the representation on the crucifixes, when both sisters contend over the Greeks and the Gothic obsession with ugliness and the mortality of the human body. Costello's viewpoint is that if Europe had to be imported into Africa it would have been better then to import Hellenism. But Blanche states that "ordinary people do not want the Greeks … They do not want marble statues. They want someone who suffers like them" (144). Readers are made aware that, for years on end, Costello and Blanche have maintained

their stony sibling relationship and conflicting ideas just as they have come to master their verbal contentions.

In the *New York Review of Books*, David Lodge wrote an article entitled "Disturbing the Peace" in which he mentions that "there is an ancient sibling rivalry as well as ideological difference in their exchanges. Elizabeth feels that she has been lured to Africa to be chastened and chastised, and it is all the more galling to find her own critique of reason turned against her" (Lodge). As they part, Blanche says, "If you had put your money on a different Greek you might have stood a chance. Orpheus instead of Apollo. The ecstatic instead of the rational" (*Elizabeth Costello* 145). Blanche thinks that what people look forward to is "someone who moves among the people, whom they can touch – put their hand into the side of, feel the wound, smell the blood" (145) and this is ultimately what she does in her hospital. The harsh rebuke directed at Costello is that she leads a distorted artist's life within her fiction and the humanities without fully comprehending the outside world of humankind. Despite this critique, David Lodge nonetheless affirms that Blanche is "a kind of alter ego to Elizabeth – an equally forceful, radical, eloquent critic of modern society, but working from quite different beliefs and principles" (Lodge). An apparent feature of Lodge's proposed alter ego argument appears in *Elizabeth Costello* in the manner in which Blanche's talk resembles Costello's and the bafflement she arouses in her listeners: "the end of Blanche's oration, which is received less with applause than with what sounds … like a murmur of general puzzlement" (123). Other passages in the novel depict the similarity of the forcefulness both characters show in the narrative, especially when Costello avoids getting involved in the guests' chatter by "let[ting] Blanche fight her own battles … She is a bit of a battleaxe, that's all. She likes a good fight" (124). In reading this sibling opposition, it appears that both appreciate their principles and eloquence, and are daring enough to disparage society and resolutely pledge their belief systems in doing so.

Having no chance to strike back at Blanche's last words, back at home, and only one month later, Costello writes a story to herself as some sort of reply to her sister, which Lodge describes as "as kind of extended *esprit d'escalier*" (Lodge). In the novel, the narrative voice tells the reader "she is writing to herself … but the words will not come, she knows, unless she thinks of this writing as a letter to Blanche" (145). It is similar to the letter-narrative in *Age of Iron* – both messages are never posted. So the last few pages of "The Humanities in Africa" are a personal account of a time when Costello comforted an elderly male friend in a nursing home, but she only writes part of her recollection in an epistolary mode because the ensuing

pages about their intimate sexual contact return to the third-person narrative. "But the message remains unsent," Lodge says, "it would shock Blanche too much" (Lodge). Costello, in the letter, tells her sister how she, in her forties, provided comfort to Mr Phillips, who was dying of cancer, by posing for his canvases in the semi-nude. She associates this episode with her conversation with Blanche at Marianhill because of the disagreement over the Zulus and the Greeks, and the true nature of the humanities. Costello bases her argument on the Renaissance artists by resorting to her appreciation and interpretation of Correggio's painting *Madonna del Latte* (1523), "when Mary blessed among women smiles her remote angelic smile and tips her sweet pink nipple up before our gaze, when I, imitating her, uncover my breasts for old Mr Phillips, we perform acts of humanity" (150). She confesses that perhaps she got the inspiration to help Mr Phillips this way from the Greeks and from the generations of Renaissance painters, who emulated the Greeks. She goes on to say that "we … reveal ourselves, reveal the life and beauty we are blessed with" (150) to finally conclude and demonstrate that Blanche is mistaken seeing as "the humanities teach us humanity … the humanities give us back our beauty, our human beauty … That is what the Greeks teach us" (151). The humanities (here Costello includes her ideal of fiction as well) continue to influence humankind and play their part in the contemporary world even if the humane studies have been led astray, as Blanche contends, from their original purpose.

What Costello has no intention of writing to her sister is how she pleased "an old fellow, an old bag of bones waiting to be carted away" (151) with sexual contact on his deathbed. This episode she cannot tell Blanche because it is not "decent enough to put in an envelope" (153) and would bring down her thoughts on the Greeks. The narrator describes Costello's act of mercy in this fashion:

> Elizabeth, crouched over the old bag of bones with her breasts dangling, working away on his nearly extinct organ of generation, what name would the Greeks give to such a spectacle? Not *eros*, certainly – too grotesque for that. *Agape*? Again, perhaps not … Would one have to wait for the Christians to come along with the right word: *caritas*?" (154 italics in original).

About this scene David Lodge asserts that it "thus transcend[s] the opposition of *eros* and *agape*, and enact[s] a fusion of spiritual and sensual ecstasy such as one sees in Renaissance religious paintings" (Lodge italics in original). Costello is convinced that, in the end, she has performed an unforeseen act of good will and charity for her fellow person. In abiding with the propositions of the Greeks, Costello has eased affliction, which Blanche holds is the

foremost noble Christian act; however, she chose to help through facilitating sexual desire – Eros.

In Greek mythology, Eros was the god responsible for lust, love, and sex. He was also worshipped as a fertility deity. His name is the root of words such as "erotic." The most famous Greek creation myth, Hesiod's *Theogony* (eighth century BC), depicts Eros springing from the primordial Chaos together with Gaia, Earth, and Tartarus, the underworld. Another myth is associated with Aristophanes' play *The Birds* (414 BC), in which Eros burgeons forth from an egg laid by Night conceived with Darkness. Alternately, later in antiquity, people saw Eros as the son of Aphrodite, and this Eros was an attendant to Aphrodite, harnessing the force of love and directing it onto mortals. In art, he was usually depicted as a winged young boy with his bow and arrows in hand. He had two kinds of arrows: one was golden with dove feathers that caused instant love; the other was lead with owl feathers that caused indifference. Worship of Eros was uncommon in early Greece, but eventually became widespread. In Athens, he shared a very popular cult with Aphrodite. There are countless Greek myths associated with Eros. One is the story of Eros and Psyche, first attested in Lucius Apuleius' Latin novel *The Golden Ass* (second century), which recounts the love between Eros and Psyche, whose name means "soul." Aphrodite was jealous of the beauty of Psyche, a mortal, and asked Eros to make her fall in love with the ugliest man on earth. Instead, he fell in love with her himself and spirited her away to his home. The jealousy of Psyche's sisters ruined their peace, and Psyche was forced to complete a number of trials, including descending to the underworld, in order to be reunited with Eros. Eventually, she bore him a daughter, Voluptas, and became immortal herself. Interest in creation myths and the Greco-Roman classics has fostered retellings that have continued to the present and contemporary literature, postmodern writing especially due to its characteristic interconnectedness, often resumes, reworks, and undermines the themes and conflicts articulated in the classical myths.

The story of Eros and Psyche arises in *Elizabeth Costello* following the protagonist's act of charity and the debate over the Greeks, and the seventh lesson of Coetzee's novel entitled "Eros." It happens that, because of a book by Susan Mitchell, "she [Costello] has just come across another telling of the Eros and Psyche story" (183), which reminds her of the poet Robert Duncan, whom she felt attracted to at the time. She would not "have minded having his love child, like one of those mortal women of myth impregnated by a passing god and left to bring up semi-divine offspring" (183). Costello recognises the interest in Psyche among poets because she too is curious about the intercourse of gods and mortals, and she is

especially interested in the transmutations of Zeus: "What intrigues her is … the mechanics … to have a full-grown male swan jabbing webbed feet into your backside … or a one-ton bull leaning his moaning weight on you" (184). In his ancient identification, Eros was adorned represented as a bull, a serpent, a lion, and with the heads of a ram. Reading Mitchell's Eros poem triggers in Costello's mind other metaphysical ways of thinking about "the whole god-and-man business" (187). The narrator draws attention to the fact that "of the two, gods and mortals, it is we who live the more urgently, feel the more intensely … They specialize in humankind because of what we have and they lack; they study us because they are envious" (189). The narrator goes on to describe how in her prime of life Costello wanted Eros to pay her a visit on earth: "she longed for the god's touch, longed until she ached" (191) so that she could promise to belittle the gods' envy and show "our energy, the endless ingenuity with which we try to elude our fate" (190). She feels that in today's world, her immortal longings are long past, but the universe is still ruled by desire, strangely, when her ageing body feels none. Her reasoning, though, is neither limited to her self nor to the present, because feelings of the precariousness of life and the inevitability of death have naturally been central to humankind.

The discussion and philosophising about Eros portray ideas which have not lost their relevance over the millennia. Plato's *Symposium* (360 BC) already provides us with those many dissimilar outlooks and theories about love. In order to trace a possible outline of the structure of Plato's Socratic dialogue one must bear in mind the frame conversation, which sets up the *Symposium*, as some friends of Apollodorus question him about a famous feast that occurred at Agathon's house some years before:

> It was only recently I was looking for you [Apollodorus] because I wanted to find out all about the time when Agathon and Socrates and Alcibiades got together, and the others who were there at the dinner-party – I wanted to ask you what they said about love … So you tell me; it's most appropriate that you should report what your friend said. (15)

Apollodorus gives his friends a full report about the party and that occupies the rest of the dialogue. The *Symposium* is notable for Socrates' description of his own teacher, the priestess Diotima. From the very start of the dialogue, the reader is made aware that the cultural elite of Athens are celebrating Agathon for having won the prize for his first tragedy. The beginning of the discussion is dominated by very light-hearted jesting and banter among the guests, but as the evening progresses talk turns to the deep subject of Eros. The build-up to the final climax happens as Socrates recounts a story of his youth when Diotima initiated him into the

art of love: "she's the very person who taught me too about erotics" (77). This escalation is an exceptionally ordered series of speeches that build on one another because there are various people featured as talking characters in Plato's work. Phaedrus opens the evening by calling Love "the oldest of gods, and most honoured, and with most power when it comes to the acquisition of virtue and happiness by human beings" (31). Eryximachus then speaks. He brands love all-powerful, saying "how great and wonderful the god is, and how his influence extends to everything, both on the level of human affairs and on that of the divine" (43). Plato then focuses on ideas which are less general and which includes Aristophanes' myth that depicts love as a desire for something that we lack:

> So, because their natural form had been cut in two, each half longed for what belonged to it and tried to engage with it; throwing their arms around each other and locking themselves together, because of their desire to grow back together, they died from not eating or indeed doing anything else, because they refused to do anything apart from each other. (53)

Agathon introduces his opinion by saying that love is tied to beauty, employing the phrase, "the god's beauty" (65). Socrates concludes this half of the speeches on love by questioning Agathon. He brings together the idea of lack and beauty by closing on the thought that "Love is of beauty" (75).

But it is the priestess Diotima, as Socrates quotes her, who brings together all the different and diffuse theories. In short, she justifies all the speeches before her, not by agreeing with them, but by praising the very act of philosophising. Furthermore, Rowe argues in his "Introduction" to the *Symposium* that "as a whole [it] is (no doubt among other things) an extended protreptic - an invitation to philosophy … that is, (a) advocacy of certain ideas, at least in an outline form, and (b) a clear sense of the provisionality of those ideas" (4). Hers is a serious and focused lecture in that Diotima gathers everything the speakers say and makes it into a coherent whole. She holds the answers to the question of the evening because she defines love. Socrates claims that he knows practically nothing, and that accounts, in one sense, for the figure of Diotima, who actually proffers ideas with great authority. Every speech about love up until that point anticipates Diotima's argument in some way, so that the readers build up to it like the characters do. C. J. Rowe writes that the dialogues in Plato's *Symposium* are "tantalising documents, which come without even implicit instructions about how they are to be read. Each dialogue appears to be designed as a separate and self-contained entity: occasionally there are references … to other dialogues, in the guise of other conversations" (3). It is therefore up to the reader to make these connections between references going back

and forth to the other dialogues. The series of six speeches which ends with that of Socrates has a special feature that entails responsiveness and intertextuality. According to Rowe, Plato usually authenticates his works, and especially the *Symposium*, by "providing them with more or less elaborate dramatic contexts, and making his characters cite their sources for ideas that *he* gives them" (3 italics in original). This way of proceeding suggests that, in principle, the arguments and conclusions spoken through his characters are open to scrutiny because his role as author is to call to the readers' attention certain ideas. It ultimately means that that philosophising in the *Symposium* is a search for a truth, or at least an approximation to parts of a truth, since we can never really grasp its wholeness.

The climax of Diotima's discourse is rendered when she says that the lover "turn[s] towards the great sea of beauty and contemplating that, may bring to birth many beautiful, even magnificent, words and thoughts in a love of wisdom" (97). Rowe writes about "the high points of the 'teaching' of 'Diotima' … 'Diotima' who is herself, apparently, a fiction of Socrates" (4). One may reason, and following what Rowe has termed the teachings of Diotima, that *Elizabeth Costello* ensues in a similar fashion due to the nature of Costello's lectures and Coetzee's choice of naming the chapters "lessons." Therefore, it is feasible to compare both characters, though very far apart historically, because they are literary creations made up by their authors who have chosen to relay ideas and theories by hiding behind the masks of Diotima and Costello. Diotima speaks through Socrates (who is speaking through Plato) when she gives her version of where love came from. She says that Love is the child of Resource and Poverty, conceived on the day that Aphrodite was born. Poverty had come to the feast to beg and found Resource drunk and passed out. She saw an opportunity to gain more resources, so she slept with him and became pregnant with Love. Love is a follower of Aphrodite because "he was conceived during her birthday party, and also because he is by nature a lover in relation to what is beautiful, and Aphrodite is beautiful" (81). Because of who his mother is Love is always poor, homeless, and always in need, but because of who his father is Love is constantly scheming to get good and beautiful things. He is clever, skilled in hunting, magic, and good at acquiring knowledge. Neither mortal nor immortal, Love can come to life in a day and then die before that day is over. Being between morality and immortality, Diotima calls Love "a great spirit … for everything of the nature of spirits is between god and mortal" (79). These great spirits are a kind of go-betweens for the god and humanity. Diotima revealed to Socrates that all lusts stem from the will for eternity and

immortality through creation of things, even the parenting of children, as this is the only victory over death.

From the outset of Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* the issues of death and old age are depicted and individualised in the novel's itinerant protagonist. Early on the narrator traces the first impressions on ageing as he focuses on Costello: "After the long flight she is looking her age. She has never taken care of her appearance; she used to be able to get away with it; now it shows. Old and tired" (3). The reader will soon after discover the scope of Costello's frailty and understand why she chooses to travel in her dishevelled plain cotton frock, only to realise that "her hair has a greasy, lifeless look" (3). At this stage in her life she is accompanied by her son John, who has been trekking around the world with her because "he is also on the point of becoming – distasteful word – her trainer" (3). John's responsibility is to help Costello through her public appearances, endure the exposure, and entertain her audience the same way Kafka's Red Peter panders to the academy. The narrative voice tells us that "he [John] thinks of her as a seal, an old, tired circus seal. One more time she must heave herself up on to the tub, one more time show that she can balance the ball on her nose. Up to him to coax her, put heart in her, get her through the performance" (3). Through the whole of the novel John's insightfulness about his mother paces the story of Costello as it progresses in time and place along with her own musings on the subject. His picture of Costello however remains the most descriptive and unsentimental when "he inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. 'There, there,' he whispers in her ear. 'There, there. It will soon be over'" (115). Nevertheless, she too acknowledges, through the narrator's indirectness, that circumstances have changed seeing as "all of a sudden, she has grown prim. Now she no longer likes to see herself in the mirror, since it puts her in mind of death. Ugly things she prefers wrapped up and stored away in a drawer" (179). In this sense, Derek Attridge argues that "she is also at a stage when the demands of the body, also easy to ignore in the healthfulness of youth, complicate the activities of the writer; when the inseparability of mental processes from physical desire and revulsion becomes unmistakable" (200). To a certain extent, Costello's fortitude and perseverance in her arguments most likely develop from her determination allied to the recognition of imminent death, as the narrator writes that she actually believes that "soon she is going to be dead" (164).

Coetzean literary debates over ageing and death were not inaugurated with *Elizabeth Costello*. Other novels by Coetzee deal with old age and mortality, particularly in *Age of Iron*, in which the similarities of Mrs Curren with Costello are strikingly obvious. Coetzee refers to her

extra-textually, in *Doubling the Point*, as Elizabeth Curren and the name "Elizabeth" and the initials "E. C." have made it into print in *Elizabeth Costello*. Mrs Curren is described as "an old woman, sick and ugly, clawing on to what she has left. The living, impatient of long dyings; the dying, envious of the living. An unsavory spectacle: may it be over soon" (54). In *Age of Iron* the end is seen as coming galloping faster and faster without forgetting the shameful example of human debasement usually experienced in inhumane nursing homes and the total neglect of the aged. The narrator writes: "There is something degrading about the way it all ends – degrading not only to us but to the idea we have of ourselves, of humankind. People lying in dark bedrooms, in their own mess, helpless. People lying in hedges in the rain" (140). It cannot be denied that the process of human ageing must be considered in the context of complex and changing societies. The ways in which people age are not entirely fixed by biology; they are also affected by individual, environmental, and social circumstances. Consequently, ageing is increasingly being studied as a process which includes psychosocial and cultural components. In addition, the subject is being extended to cover the entire course of life, rather than being restricted to the period of old age. The readers of Coetzee's works have noticed that the subject of dying is sometimes transferred to the sphere of animals, and it generally revolves around the slaughtering and cruelty perpetrated against them. He often compares the lives of animals to that of humans as in *Foe* when Susan Barton writes in her letters: "Friday grows old before his time, like a dog locked up all its life. I too, from living with an old man and sleeping in his bed, have grown old" (55). Nearly a decade after *Foe*, Coetzee's Dostoevsky tells the little Matryosha in *The Master of Petersburg*, "animals don't find it hard to die … Perhaps we should take our lesson from them. Perhaps that is why they are with us here on earth - to show us that living and dying are not as hard as we think" (208). Unlike Costello and Mrs Curren, Dostoevsky seems very complacent about the inevitability of death until he explains that "what frightens us most about dying isn't the pain. It is the fear that we must leave behind those who love us and travel alone" (208).

In the lesson titled "Eros" in *Elizabeth Costello*, the narrator posits that "love and death. The gods, the immortals, were the inventors of death and corruption" (189), which leads us to establish the classic antagonist of love. In Greek mythology, Thanatos was the personification of death and he was deemed a creature of supernatural and uncanny darkness. He plays a slight role in the Greek myths due to Hades, the lord of death, who rather overshadowed Thanatos. According to the classics, Night, the destructive, at one time brought into being a horde of villainous immortals and Thanatos was one of that wretched lot. Poetically he is

often called the brother of Sleep and the son of Night. In art, Thanatos was depicted as a young man carrying a butterfly, wreath or inversed torch in his hands. He sometimes had two wings and a sword attached to his belt.

Other uses however have been attributed to the Greek personification of death. In psychoanalytical theory, Thanatos is the death instinct, which opposes Eros. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Sigmund Freud distinguishes the two classes of instincts:

> one of which, the sexual instincts or Eros … It comprises not merely the uninhibited sexual instinct proper … but also the self-preservative instinct … The second class of instincts … [on] the basis of theoretical considerations, supported by biology, we put forward the hypothesis of a death instinct, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state. (Freud 645)

Freud's views on the theory of instincts appeared in his other publications, and namely in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), in which he studies human nature in conflict with its institutional surroundings: "That is to say, as well as Eros there was an instinct of death. The phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of these two instincts" (754). Freud maintains that "man's natural aggressive instinct" (756), the hostilities within humankind, opposes his perception of civilisation. He writes:

> This aggressive instinct is the derivative of and the main representative of the death instinct which we have found alongside of Eros and which shares world-dominion with it. And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. (756)

Freud believed that humans were driven by two drives, libidinal energy (Eros) and the death drive (Thanatos). Freud's description of Eros/Libido included all creative, life-producing drives. The death drive represented an urge inherent in all living things to return to a state of calm, or, ultimately, of non-existence. The "death instinct" identified by Freud signals a desire to concede defeat to the struggle of life and return to quiescence and the grave. Everywhere in *Elizabeth Costello,* the novel and its unsettling protagonist discuss and consider the question of Eros in opposition to Thanatos, while the reader is entrusted to consider whether one is to be eventually preferred over the other.

While Coetzee introduced with *Elizabeth Costello* a new and bracing literary reflection on senescence and mortality, the themes have nevertheless traversed his fiction in general. Besides *Elizabeth Costello*, another episode in the life of this prominent character appeared a few months after the publication of the novel, and the piece is entitled "As a Woman Grows

Older." It was read at the New York Public Library and printed in the *New York Review of Books* in January 2004, and it consists mostly of dialogues between Costello and her son and daughter, who are anxious about their now seventy-two-year-old mother's refusal to veer from her mode of life. In a sense, Costello's arguments in her lessons anticipate the impressive contents of "As a Woman Grows Older" since in *Elizabeth Costello* she states: "I know what it is like to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror; I shy away from it, refuse to entertain it" (76-77). However, she goes even further as she claims, "all of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older. The knowledge we have is not abstract" (77), thus alluding to the title of the above-mentioned Costello story. This narrative opens with similarities to *Elizabeth Costello* as the character flies out to visit her daughter Helen in Nice, though her son will finally meet up with them. Costello speculates whether together her children have made plans for "some proposal to put to her of the kind that children put to a parent when they feel she can no longer look after herself" ("As a Woman Grows Older"). Once again Coetzee has employed a third-person narration and has used the present tense, and the plot even resumes themes and feelings from *Elizabeth Costello*. Her duties as a mother are questioned, and the stony relationship with her daughter-in-law is merited with one line only – Costello asks John how Norma is doing and he says "Norma is well. She sends her love. The children are well" ("As a Woman"). Furthermore, and despite its sparseness, "As a Woman" is imbued with intricate philosophy; it continues Costello's usual arguments in the form of a short informal lecture and a brief bedtime story.

The leitmotifs of fatality and senescence gain additional pre-eminence in the story seeing as Costello thinks further about ageing and dying. Her thoughts lead her to believe that "there is one thing the old are better at than the young, and that is dying. It behoves the old … to die well … That is the direction of my thinking. I would like to concentrate on making a good death" ("As a Woman"). Astonishingly and straightforwardly, unlike her often withheld opinions, Costello tells her daughter, and consequently the reader, that "a good death is one that takes place far away, where the mortal residue is disposed of by strangers, by people in the death business. A good death is one that you learn of by telegram: *I regret to inform you*, etcetera" ("As a Woman" italics in original). It returns to the issue of human debasement and inhumane treatment as Helen retorts that "it is not right to die alone … with no one to hold your hand. It is antisocial. It is inhuman" ("As a Woman"). During the metaphysical conversations with her children, she proposes what she calls "my contribution to brain

science" ("As a Woman") which encompasses Costello's views on the desires and energies of a senescent person:

> As we age, every part of the body deteriorates or suffers entropy, down to the very cells … old cells are touched with the colors of autumn (a metaphor, I concede, but a dash of metaphor here and there does not add up to metaphysics) … Just as spring is the season that looks forward to summer, so autumn is the season that looks back. The desires conceived by autumnal brain cells are autumnal desires, nostalgic, layered in memory. ("As a Woman")

As a scientist and rationalist, John holds that his mother's theories and ensuing arguments are more in the frame of a speculative branch of the philosophy of mind than anything scientifically grounded. If Norma were present she would undoubtedly support John and sneer at Costello's literary analysis and perspective on reputed scientific matters. Nevertheless, Costello maintains her belief in discipline, inventiveness, and embodiment in her fiction writing because, and in spite of scientific rationale, "gloomy states of mind do not yield interesting thoughts, at least not in my experience" ("As a Woman").

Thoughts in "As a Woman Grows Older" also rest on literary writing and authorship because fiction still remains her speciality, and according to the narrator, "not her *métier*, argumentation" (*Elizabeth Costello* 80 italics in original). The conversational mode in "As a Woman" reiterates Costello's talent: "I still confine myself to fiction, you [Helen] will be relieved to hear. I have not yet descended to hawking my opinions around. *The Opinions of Elizabeth Costello*, revised edition" ("As a Woman" italics in original) - the title of a hypothetical collection of short stories which includes the bedtime story transcribed. One cannot overlook the paradox this statement entails when Costello herself is undeniably connected, though solely due to her author and the title attributed, to the "Eight Lessons" which compose *Elizabeth Costello*. Derek Attridge writes in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* that "the Costello pieces … are, whatever their generic oddness, works of literature … We must not miss the irony in the collection's subtitle, Eight Lessons: it is Elizabeth Costello as much as the reader who is undergoing these lessons" (197-198). In the chapters (lessons), episodes from Costello's life as an old respected writer are described, only the most obvious sign that this is a didactic work. These are stories – scenes from the life of a writer – but almost all revolve around one or several lectures. The stories are more than framing devices, and the lectures often only given in part, but it is the arguments of these pieces that are the core of each lesson. Attridge contends that

> One negative response to *Elizabeth Costello* has been to complain that Coetzee uses his fictional creations to advance arguments … without assuming responsibility for them, and is thus ethically at fault. To level this charge is to take the arguments presented *as arguments*, and to take the making of them as the fundamental purpose of the pieces in which they occur. (197 italics in original)

In response to Helen's constant provocations in "As a Woman," Costello argues that

> What you have produced as a writer not only has a beauty of its own … but has also changed the lives of others, made them … slightly better human beings. It is not just I who says so. Other people say so too, strangers. To me, to my face. Not because what you write contains lessons but because it *is* a lesson" ("As a Woman" italics in original).

Evidently, Costello is referring to the critical acclaim she has received for her books worldwide and the reactions she actually experiences first-hand on her lecture trips. She believes, and many of her critics concur, that she has played an important role in the betterment of humanity through her fiction writing. Both the novel's subtitle "Eight Lessons" and the protagonist's personal lessons, which include her most avid arguments, combine to support Costello's statement, from in "As a Woman Grows Older," that the fiction she writes is not simply a series of lessons, but it is in itself a lesson. Therefore, Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* clearly epitomises the protagonist's position, a position that features snippets from her personal life as a mother, sister, and lover, as they become framing devices for her intellectual lessons. The personal and the literary representations of the world can never be detached.

2. A life's writing and stating beliefs in Disgrace and Elizabeth Costello

By arranging *Elizabeth Costello* as a series of lessons, nonetheless, Coetzee's novel also pursues theological and philosophical interests, particularly in "Eros" and "At the Gate." Moving closer towards her own death, and anticipated by her son in "The Poets and the Animals" – "There, there. It will soon be over" (115) – Costello ruminates on the artistic and sexual relations between the gods and humankind in "Eros." Costello, who seemingly has died, so the reader presumes, awaits admittance into heaven in the eighth lesson, "At the Gate." This chapter overtly recalls Franz Kafka's embedded metaparable "Before the Law" in his novel *The Trial* (1925). She is confounded by the Kafkaesque bathos of the situation in which she finds herself:

> There is no more doubt in her mind about where she is, who she is. She is a petitioner before the gate. The journey that brought her here, to this country, to this town … was not the end of it all. Now commences a trial of a different kind. Some act is required of her, some prescribed yet undefined affirmation, before she will be found good and can pass through. (194)

The eighth lesson brings the novel to its conclusion. Costello descends from a bus in her blue cotton frock, suitcase in hand, in a town where there is a gate and a gatekeeper, a clichéd holocaust dormitory, and a tribunal of inquisitors. In "Disturbing the Peace," David Lodge says that "everything in this place reminds one of something encountered a hundred times before in books, plays, films: the Kafkaesque court, the idle customers at the café tables, the uniformed band … the stonewalling guardian of the gate" (Lodge). Costello believes that if this is the threshold to the afterlife they could have been more original and could have avoided torturing her – a writer – with clichés: "Is it all being mounted for her sake, because she is a writer? Is it someone's idea of what hell will be like for a writer, or at least purgatory: a purgatory of clichés?" (206). Her conversation with John in "As a Woman Grows Older" restates her views on her clichéd positions because "all I can do is fume about it, fume and deplore. And deplore myself too. I have become trapped in a cliché, and I no longer believe that history will be able to budge that cliché … the cliché of the stuck record" ("As a Woman"). Costello's fears hinge on her belief that her message to the world, to her readers, has lost its meaning and has become bleak, and similar reservations persist in *Elizabeth Costello.*

Once more, the interconnections between *Elizabeth Costello* and "As a Woman" are striking because of the expressive attitudes towards death. In the story, Costello asks Helen "what will I say to the man at the border when he asks the purpose of my visit, business or pleasure? Or, worse, when he asks how long I plan to stay? *Forever? To the end? Just a brief while?*" ("As a Woman" italics in original). Helen's answer is that "one of these days you are going to find yourself at heaven's gate with your hands empty and a big question mark over your head. It would be entirely in character for you, that is to say for Elizabeth Costello, to say so. And to believe so" ("As a Woman"), which clearly epitomises Costello's position in the presence of the court. She is required to make a statement of belief before she is allowed to pass through the gate. So in *Elizabeth Costello* the protagonist affirms she has no beliefs because it is not congruent with her work: "I am a writer … It is not my profession to believe, just to write … I do imitations, as Aristotle would have said" (194); but for her passage through the gate her imitation of a belief will not suffice. The first segment of her initial draft

of the statement of belief reads as such: "*I am a writer, a trader in fictions … I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way. I change beliefs as I change my habitation or my clothes, according to my needs*" (195 italics in original). Displeased with Costello's document, the gatekeeper arranges accommodation for her until she is able to write an adequate and satisfactory application. She drags her belongings to a roughly built dormitory, and claims one of the bunks – "the dark rust colour she associates with rolling stock … she can see stencilled characters: 1000 377/3 CJG, 282 220/0 CXX … She could be in any of the gulags, she thinks. She could be in any of the camps of the Third Reich" (197). The dormitory resembles the barracks of the death camps and the warden herself is a cliché, something Costello knows and talks about throughout because of her staunch arguments that the concentration camps are comparable to slaughterhouses. The clichés and literary worlds recreated in this place, apparently just for her sake, seem to echo her inner frustrations, her long-lasting arguments about animals, along with the formative influence of Kafka.

The bench of inquisitors summoned to judge her re-enact, according to Costello, "the interrogation of Joan of Arc" (204), and as she concentrates on their physical appearance she then summarises her surroundings as a kind of literary theme park: "The wall, the gate, the sentry, are straight out of Kafka. So is the demand for a confession, so is the courtroom with the dozing bailiff and the panel of old men in their crows' robes" (209). Again before the judges she reads out her statement and reiterates her literary standing by saying "I am a writer … I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages … It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given me" (199). It is inappropriate for the literary writer – for the good secretary – to have beliefs. As a fiction writer, she should not have beliefs because they are "a resistance, an obstacle" (200), which contradicts the entirety of the book up to this point. Costello thus claims to possess negative capability seeing that "I have beliefs but I do not believe in them … My heart is not in them. My heart and my sense of duty" (200). The poet John Keats introduced the term "negative capability" in a letter written in December 1817 to define a literary quality which Shakespeare possessed. The term has entered critical circulation and has accumulated a large body of commentary. Negative capability can be taken to characterise an impersonal, or objective, author who maintains aesthetic distance, as opposed to a subjective author who is involved with the characters, and as opposed to an author who uses literature to make his/her personal beliefs persuasive.

As a writer, Costello feels she has been appointed the secretary of the invisible to voice atrocities committed against the weak: "Violations of innocent children. The extermination of

whole peoples" (202), and "if it is their murderers and violators who choose to summon me instead, to use me and speak through me, I will not close my ears to them, I will not judge them … Not as long as they speak the truth" (204). Her words to the judges resound in an affirmation Gao Xingjan notes down in "Literature as Testimony: The Search for Truth," in which he maintains that "while thus focused on truth, the writer is no longer concerned with any sort of value. The observation of and search for truth thus becomes the writer's unique and ultimate ethics" (126). Costello too has carried into her late years faith in the artist and confidence in her/his truth. All writers, from ancient times to the present, live in their own times so their literature is a testimony to the predicament of human life. In order to be a good secretary Costello must avoid resistance and obstacles since "literature," according to Xingjan, "is subservient to nothing but truth and, in this domain of the free spirit, the writer obeys only one command: to search for truth" (113), and "observation is superior to judgement, because judgement distorts" (126). The observer is deemed great because of her/his tolerance, knowledge, and compassion towards the world and the self. Xingjan holds that through literary techniques writers "can achieve a more profound understanding of the human world even though this sort of observation, based as it is only on the individual writer, has its limitations" (115-116). This in turn prepares for the idea that "in the writing of fiction, it has become an increasingly widespread practice for writers to fictionalise their own personal experiences" (119), an approach the narrative voice in *Elizabeth Costello* shares as we read that "her books … spell out how one person lived, one among billions: the person whom she, to herself, calls *she*, and whom others call *Elizabeth Costello*" (207-208 italics in original). Mrs Curren too is self-aware of her role within the writing process seeing as she admits that, "I wrote. I write. I follow the pen, going where it takes me" (*Age of Iron* 108). All matters, subjects, and questions are there for the undertaking so that they may be voiced through the artist.

It is in the presence of the second bench of judges, which now includes a woman, that Costello illustrates her point as she explains why she has been defying their requisites of a genuine and trustworthy statement. They presume she is confused, perhaps even in the grips of dementia when Costello states that "I believe in those little frogs" (*Elizabeth Costello* 217), those frogs recalled from her childhood which survived hibernation in the riverbeds of the Dulgannon River in Australia. In her account, she goes on to say how the frogs lived, died, and were regenerated year after year in the mudflats, and though "the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical … to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only

thing" (217). Discredited before the panel, Costello must endure as they mock and distrust her two statements: "Is childhood on the Dulgannon another of your stories, Mrs Costello? Along with the frogs and the rain from heaven?" (218), promptly undermining her plausibility because she is an artist after all. The narrator joins in the same judgement as he asserts that "today, it would appear, she is disposed to believe in frogs. What will it be tomorrow? … The objects of her belief appear to be quite random" (222) and it seems Costello actually lives, to some extent, by volatile sways of belief. Throughout her life writing she has been posing as other modes of being and for the woman judge "these Australian frogs of yours embody the spirit of life, which is what you as a storyteller believe in" (218-219). In his analysis of embodiment and the example of the jaguar poem Costello uses in Lesson 4, Derek Attridge alleges that

> Part of the burden she [Costello] is now experiencing is the burden of feeling one's way into other lives, including the lives of animals: the greater one's capacity to enter imaginatively into a different mode of existence, the stronger one's horror at behavior that denies its value. (202)

In the article "A Frog's Life," James Wood contends that the book's closing pages are "the moment at which animals and literature are again united: the frogs, like a novelist's characters, are believed in by the novelist, but cannot themselves believe in the novelist. To enter the frog's life is like entering a fictional character's life" (Wood). At this stage, the early claims of embodiment proposed in "Realism" are finally understood as it is made clear that disembodiment is unworkable in Costello's fiction.

Allowed only a glimpse through a small crack of the place lying behind the gate, Costello is forced to envision for herself the afterlife, the far side of the gate which she is denied. The narrative voice proceeds to depict her vision: "At the foot of the gate, blocking the way, lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from the innumerable manglings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity" (*Elizabeth Costello* 224). In *Boyhood*, John's mother often contrasts her current life with the life she lived before she was married; a life substantiated by photo albums. Interestingly, when her former life, a life she represents as a "continual round of parties and picnics, of weekend visits to farms, of tennis and golf and walks with her dogs" (48), comes to an end after her husband appears in the snapshots, the dogs disappear from the album and her life. John does not mention an end of the parties, but pins the change in her life down to the immediate disappearance of dogs, which turns them into a symbol for a life his mother has lost. Young John gets the right to name the first dog

thrust into his life and gives it the name Cossack, but the dog turns out to be confused and undisciplined. Even before Cossack has grown out "he eats the ground glass someone has put out for him" (50) and suffers for three days. They try everything to save the dog, whereas John's father is never mentioned in this context, and in the end John decides he does not want his family to have another dog, not if "this is how they must die" (50). The protagonist also portrays his visits to a farm of his relatives on several occasions and he feels close to the animals. There is an instance which deals with the slaughtering of sheep and he thinks philosophically about sheep and their fate, which they seem to accept without rebellion. He attributes a kind of resignation and foreknowledge to the sheep, as "they know it all, down to the finest detail, and yet they submit. They have calculated the price and are prepared to pay it – the price of being on earth, the price of being alive" (102).

The disgraceful deaths of dogs in *Disgrace* stands in line with the death of Cossack, and the philosophising about animals at the clinic as described for the dogs in the novel can be compared to John's thoughts about their fate in *Boyhood*. When Petrus buys two sheep to slaughter for his party, it is the main character, David Lurie, who tries to ease their fate: "He has thought of buying the sheep from Petrus. But what will that accomplish? … A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians … suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (*Disgrace* 126). In *Disgrace*, dogs are a metaphorical device used to illustrate the developments of several characters, but simultaneously the purpose of the dog itself is also quite symbolic. In the novel, dogs are generally owned by white South Africans or are strays. "Dogs still mean something. The more dogs the more deterrence" (60) Lucy states when she shows her father, David Lurie, her small farm. Lurie describes his daughter as a "sturdy young settler" (61) with a rather simple life – "Dogs and a gun; bread in the oven and a crop in the earth" (60) – who earns her living from her kennels and produce revenues at her market stall. At the time Lurie arrives at Lucy's farm in the Eastern Cape five solid pens have been constructed for the dogs – watchdogs all of them. She refers to them as "working dogs, on short contracts" (61), so it is clear that she earns most of her money with dogs that are predominantly used for the protection of white people and their property against the dangers of the new South Africa. In another instance, Lucy describes dogs as "part of the furniture, part of the alarm system" (78), which further manifests their main purpose in the country. Historically, dogs were introduced to South Africa by Europeans, who brought them in for home and family protection.

In confrontations between the Luries and the three intruders, dogs have two appearances in *Disgrace*. When Lucy and Lurie come home from a walk around her farm, the men await them at their stoep: "The two men stand at a remove while the boy, beside the cages, hisses at the dogs and makes sudden, threatening gestures. The dogs, in a rage, bark and snap. The dog at Lucy's side tries to tug loose. Even the old bulldog bitch … is growling softly" (92). It should have been a warning at this point, but the two fail to sense the imminent danger. Lurie stays outside while two of them accompany Lucy inside after claiming to need her telephone, but he soon realises something has gone terribly wrong. He creeps into the kitchen through the bottom leaf of the door but is knocked unconscious and left in the lavatory – there he muses over the ongoing events:

> So it has come, the day of testing. Without warning, without fanfare, it is here, and he is in the middle of it. In his chest his heart hammers so hard that it too, in its dumb way, must know. How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart?
>
> His child is in the hands of strangers. In a minute, in an hour, it will be too late; whatever is happening to her will be set in stone, will belong to the past. (94)

The hissing boy turns out to be Pollux, a relative of Lucy's neighbour Petrus, who reappears in the storyline when Lurie sets the same bulldog on him. This second encounter seems much worse for Pollux because he fails to defend himself and is bitten by the dog. With the dog's purpose being that of a protective device, it is possible to argue that the dog itself stands more for the white community than for the black community in *Disgrace* or South Africa in general.

Lucy decided to move into a commune on the Eastern Cape years before and the commune's home was the farm she still inhabits. She has made friends like Bev and Bill Shaw, who run the local animal welfare clinic. Lurie does not hide his initial disapproval of people like the Shaws and when Lucy responds to his ramblings, she underlines the importance of the animal clinic by pointing out that she would not "want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us" (74). This statement, uttered at a time when one could conclude that Lucy is living a perfect life, can be used to illustrate her deep fall, as she ends up as a dog. "Yes, like a dog" (205) is her powerful response to Lurie's question whether she truly wants to live a disgraceful life like a dog under the conditions forced on her. It is symbolic that the author connects her new existence, which has nothing to do with the near-perfect life of a "frontier farmer of the new breed … [and] a solid woman" (62), with that of a dog. The crime committed by the three who used her "like dogs in a pack" (159) crushes Lurie's confidence and happiness. Surprisingly, she does not even report the

rape to the police, and her relationship with her father worsens continuously. Lucy is terribly scared that the three will return, as she says "I think I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me" (158), a term semantically related to dogs, but also she does not want to leave her farm. Circumstances become even more depressing when she confesses she is pregnant and intends to have the baby. Lurie sees how ridiculous his daughter's situation has become and is deeply frustrated by the humiliation she appears to be willing to accept. Moreover, he too has stooped to a lower level and equal state of humiliation because of the scandal his behaviour provoked at university.

Throughout the novel, David Lurie continually dismantles his professional career. Whereas he was a professor of communications at the Technical University of Cape Town at the beginning, he finished up more or less unemployed because of a harassment scandal. In addition to his fall from grace, as a university professor, his plans for his own chamber opera, "*Byron in Italy*" (4), seem to fail as well. In an article entitled "*Disgrace*: A Path to Grace?" Charles Sarvan writes that "like the romantic poet about whom he tries to compose an opera, Lurie is in disgrace, gossiped about, and ostracized. Byron fled overseas, and Lurie seeks refuge with his daughter on her farm" (27). With no secure income and his unpaid job at the animal clinic run by Bev Shaw, Lurie's life seems on track for disaster. Instead of the university, where he enjoyed his existence as a professor, it is the animal clinic that becomes his home at the end of the book:

> In the bare compound behind the building he makes a nest of sorts, with a table and an old armchair … and a beach umbrella to keep off the worst of the sun. He brings in the gas stove to make tea or warm up canned food: spaghetti and meatballs, snoek and onions. Twice a day he feeds the animals; he cleans out their pens and occasionally talks to them; other wise he reads or dozes or … picks out on Lucy's banjo the music he will give to Teresa Guiccioli. (*Disgrace* 211)

He also refers to himself as a "dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*" (146), the role Petrus played on the farm. Lurie identifies with the role of "dog-man" when he delivers the dead bodies into the incinerator, where they are burnt to ashes. Sarvan contends that "Lurie … is at the lowest point in his life, without his professorship, in disgrace, having failed to protect his daughter, no longer able to really communicate with her … reduced to living in a tiny, rented room, hiding his identity and past" (27). Therefore, the novel ends with Lurie helping Bev with the clinic – work unlike his habitual teaching position - that now is much harder and not easier at all.

In *Disgrace*, the dogs also serve as a symbol to show how Lurie's ambitions to write a successful piece fail. His writing career has been mediocre at best, with three published books, "none of which has caused a stir or even a ripple" (4). Despite this record, he invests a lot of energy into his next work. When the novel draws to a conclusion, he spends the days in the backyard, where his "opera is not a hobby, not any more. It consumes him night and day" (214). However, he realises that in truth his work is not advancing and that his musical resources are not up to the task he had set for himself. Lurie seems to be deceiving himself, as the only being that pays any attention to his work is one of the dogs in the holding pens: "The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa's lines … the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling" (215). But the handicapped dog's days are numbered because there is no hope that he will be adopted. Once Lurie decides that the dog's "time must come, it cannot be evaded" (219) and carries it to the deadly needle, Bev is surprised that he is willing to part from the dog. In the last lines of the novel Lurie says that he is "giving him up" (220), after he carried it to the surgery "bearing him in his arms like a lamb" (220). In this sense, Charles Sarvan argues that

> Lurie finds meaningful work, reaches acceptance, and so achieves a measure of tranquillity, if not the higher serenity … Leaving the path of pleasure for that joy, he moves from disgrace toward grace, from the loss of social position and reputation to an individual, secular salvation. (29)

The strong symbolism of animals in this context is evident when one concludes that Lurie's ambitious plans have failed and then the dog, the only character in the novel that gave any sort of feedback to his ongoing oeuvre, is suddenly sacrificed.

The Lives of Animals, and consequently a great portion of *Elizabeth Costello*, was published between *Disgrace* and *Youth*, and it is clearly linked to the scenes in the animal welfare clinic in *Disgrace* and the appalling treatment of the dogs in the novel. The lesson David Lurie learns passes judgement, by implication, on a society in which groups of human beings have been oppressed and ill-treated. *Disgrace* operates in terms of Coetzean paradigms and myths, and of these, the most prevailing have included the colonial situation, the parent-child and male-female bonds that are fraying or already severed. Costello, like David Lurie, has a troubled relationship with her child. Reading *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* reveals parallels in the structure of these texts. Lurie, Costello, and Blanche are all both private individuals and academics - Blanche also speaks for the Catholic Church. All express publicly eccentric

opinions that they anticipate will rile the audiences. These publicly aired positions are disseminated within the private sphere: Lurie's retreat to the farm, Costello's bitter argument with Norma, and her visit to Marianhill and the ensuing uncomfortable leave-taking. Arguably, public debate is to some degree resolved within the private domain – private speaks to public. The key elements in *Disgrace* – a predatory man and a self-sufficient daughter who is gang-raped – are also present in Coetzee's earlier story of an African farm, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). Set in the first half of the twentieth century, the novel is narrated by Magda, whose name (recalling the Afrikaans word for virgin, "maagd") like Lucy's, suggests her separateness from those around her. Living alone with her father, resenting his tyranny, Magda wishes for a stop to solipsism. *In the Heart of the Country* is a sombre book because it concludes with a total failure of reciprocity between parent and child, male and female, the coloniser and the colonised. Therefore, *Disgrace* appears to offer a regeneration of this standstill, as a result of which Lucy and Petrus will manage to coexist. Other frayed ties are epitomised in the elderly Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, in which she is estranged from her only daughter and now dying of cancer. She adopts the vagrant Vercueil as a companion, but he remains an impassive bystander to her later years. Like David Lurie, Mrs Curren is a former teacher, who sees the world through the prism of the classics, her own specialised field of knowledge. She offers well-meant advice to Bheki when he is hunted by the police for his involvement in a resistance group, but her moral lessons are ignored.

In turn, Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* is centred on the protagonist's blatant strategy of withdrawal because he desperately wants to be outside beliefs. Michael K refuses to speak out for himself by maintaining his self untouched due to his likeness to stone, as the narrator reveals: "Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought" (48). In addition, his alienation becomes more evident later on when K is characterised using similar terms: "He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God know what else like a stone. Through the intestines of the war" (135). Moreover, on several occasions K is depicted as being unaware of his surroundings, ignorant of what is going on in the world: "I am not in the war" (138) reaffirming his simplicity, his solitariness, ultimately his desire to remain an outsider. The characters K comes across make the same common mistake of misreading his actual needs. From the medical officer to the beach vagrants, from the nurses to the fellow camp inmates, all misunderstand K's silence and inwardness, wishing to awaken him from his slumber: "You're a baby … You've been asleep all your life. It's time to wake up. Why do you think they give you charity, you and the children? Because they think you are harmless, your

eyes aren't opened, you don't see the truth around you" (88-89). K's spirit is choked by dependence on and the charity of a group of young urban vagrants who coerce him to become passive, and so he complains that "everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me" (181).

The truth of K's existence is not that of a victim, a dependent child and a tamed pet "as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey" (181), but of a simple and humble being. He is not concerned with the tales of torture and exploitation happening in the camps, and he does not feel compelled to tell those stories since "I was mute and stupid in the beginning, I will be mute and stupid at the end. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple" (182). Coetzee, by means of his protagonist, does not fall into simplistic criticism of the apartheid system by blatantly reciting the crimes committed against people classified as Other. Nevertheless, there are attempts in the novel in order to persuade K to disclose his outsider experience. The medical officer, at one instance, makes a speech encouraging K to tell them his story:

> *Talk*, Michaels … Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed … Well then, *talk*, make your voice heard, tell your story. We are listening! Where else in the world are you going to find two polite civilized gentlemen ready to listen to your story all day and all night, if need be, and take notes too? (140 italics in original)

To some degree, this scene has meaning when read in line with both the Kafka allegory of Red Peter, which hinges on a speaker's presentation before his civilised audience, and the lecture-narratives which appear in *Elizabeth Costello*. Michael K's reluctance is in direct contrast with Costello, whose apprehension about alienation from the world inspires her to share her stories, and who, without offering resistance into her conscious self or disregarding moral issues, narrates her experiences.

The final lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*, "At the Gate," is an unmitigated dramatisation of this self-examination which marks Costello's intellectual and sentimental realm during the whole of these plots. At the centre of these fictional representations of viewpoints that have been widely debated stands openly the issue of belief. The question remaining is whether Coetzee himself or us readers believe in what Costello or Blanche expound in their public addresses about the lives of animals, the representation of love, or the value of the humanities. As a writer of fiction she cannot have beliefs, so she tells her judges when they force a statement from her. In the novel, Costello's beliefs and Blanche's beliefs are what the readers

intend them to be and not Coetzee's at all. Lodge says that in reading this final lesson "we wonder what has happened to her passionate belief in the rights of animals" (Lodge), but this comment overlooks the difference between fiction and nonfiction. There is no disparity between Costello's abjuration in "At the Gate" and her vehement manifestation of beliefs in the lecture-narratives as she clarifies that

> Of course, gentlemen, I do not claim to be bereft of all belief. I have what I think of as opinions and prejudices, no different in kind from what are commonly called beliefs. When I claim to be a secretary clean of belief I refer to my ideal self, a self capable of holding opinions and prejudices at bay while the word which it is her function to conduct passes through her. (*Elizabeth Costello* 200)

On the one hand, the first occurrence applies to the protagonist's position as a novelist, but on the other hand, lies her existence as a human being. In his article about *Elizabeth Costello*, Lodge further praises Coetzee for having created the character of Costello, a woman who endures

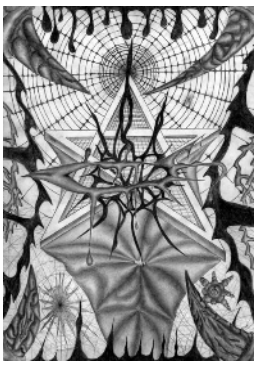
> The transition from middle age to old age, coming to the end of sexuality, to the end of fulfilling personal relationships, even perhaps to the end of writing, and finding a new urgency in the big, perennial questions: Why are we here? What should we do? What is it all about?" (Lodge)

Reading about these characters' beliefs is accompanying their arguments as events in a plotline while ideas and feelings coalesce.

"At the Gate" however is not a line of reasoning about the part belief plays in fiction, but rather a provocative incitement to the readers so that we may participate together with Costello in her belief about believing. To the very end she continues to speculate about the writer's facility to enter other human and nonhuman existences through what she has termed embodiment. Moreover, this exploration about the role of belief runs through the series of Costello narratives given that "it is when we take all the Costello pieces together that their abiding concern with the creation of literary works, with what it means to commit oneself to a life of writing, emerges most clearly" (Attridge 200). The figure of Costello as a writer is always central despite the distinct works and the different issues that are raised. The narrative voice conveys that "her mind, when she is truly herself, appears to pass from one belief to the next, pausing, balancing, then moving on" (*Elizabeth Costello* 222). Here Coetzee yet again re-enacts the sacrifice of fictional creativity which has been broached before in previous novels, and alluded to in the closing lines of *Boyhood* when John "alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does

not remember them, who will?" (166); he contemplates the responsibility of the storyteller's calling. In *Elizabeth Costello*, for Costello and the reader, the meaningful ethical and literary event is that of self-questioning, of storytelling, of assessment, and not solely the ultimate outcome.

Conclusion



There is a widespread consensus among the critics of J. M. Coetzee's work that indicates that his fictions are acute assessments of the contemporary world, and furthermore, that they epitomise postmodern novel writing. Ever since the 1970s, when Coetzee inaugurated his literary career with the publication of the novels *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), he has proven that he is a keen observer of the world, and South Africa in particular. Coetzee's fictional incursions into issues such as social injustices, the apartheid system, authorship, and ethics have always veered from conventional realistic writing, which so often prevails in African literatures. Critics and fellow literary writers often claim that, in the past, Coetzee's fiction was not adequately engaged in the political struggles of the Black South African democratic movements and that his allegorical plots lacked the force to instigate changes within the country and even among South Africa's intelligentsia. In many cases Coetzee's influence has been underrated, his novels misinterpreted, and their fundamental self-questioning quality underestimated. Despite these unenthusiastic assessments about his novels, Coetzee prefers to maintain his position as an alternative in contemporary and postmodern literature, while subverting and transcending the realistic trend. In fact, his earlier novels are examinations of postcolonial sentiment and apartheid – *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K* – while *Foe* similarly reworks Defoe's classic *Robinson Crusoe* as it parodies and undermines the conventions of the Western canon.

Parody is neither exclusive to Coetzee's work, nor is it a recent postmodern generic theory, because parodic readings and rewritings of prior texts have been a common practice in literature for centuries now. Parody and reinterpretations count on the intertextual nature of texts, and nowadays readers are well aware that writers use this infinite source of knowledge to create their alternate fictional worlds while transgressing canonical conventions. The protagonist in *Elizabeth Costello* relies on intertextuality as a way of life, both as a novelist and as a lecturer, because her moral arguments proposed as Lessons are always devised in relation to the archive of the canon. Costello seemingly prefers the literary intellectuals, such as Swift, Defoe, Kafka, and Ted Hughes, to the proponents of reason. Therefore, the dichotomy of art and reason marks substantial differences in the episodes within the novel, and the reader finds enthusiasts for both on either side of the debate. These differences prompt the familial discussions between Costello and Norma, who is a scientist and an avid defender of the rational. She does not take Costello's literary digressions and reasoning seriously because she does not appreciate her mother-in-law's incursions into science when her beliefs should lie within what she knows best - the limits of storytelling. Nevertheless, in her lessons, Costello

proposes, for instance, two approaches to the subject "The Lives of Animals," in which she makes a case for the philosophers and poets alike, though her heart clearly lies with the latter. She maintains that poetic invention allows the poet to teach us more about the lives of animals, and that literature spurs an engagement with other existences by pursuing more than simple abstract thought.

Furthermore, Costello's fiction typifies her statement that commitment with characters and ideas is central in novel writing, and as John proclaims in favour of his mother, "she can think her way into other people, into other existences" (22). Ultimately, one of the most important qualities of fiction is that it is able to detach us from ourselves and take us into representations of foreign lives. *Elizabeth Costello* acts out the divergence between embodiment and reason as it contrasts embodiment (the sensation of being) with rational thought. Writers invent situations in their fictions in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby, in a certain sense, embody them. The notion of embodiment happens to be significant because ideas are disputable and they are bound to the speakers and stem from their individual interests. Costello uses Franz Kafka's ape, Red Peter, in "A Report for an Academy" to enlighten John and the readers on embodying ideas: "It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself" (32). In this sense, the reader understands why Costello contests realism and, furthermore, how the novel has contending ideas developed from different characters. Alongside the lectures, there are episodes of human interaction, particularly between Costello and her close family, but Coetzee is more interested in discussing their ideas, which permeate the novel, rather than appraising their relationships. Despite what critics have termed a succession of tiresome ruminations in the form of academic addresses, *Elizabeth Costello* is a unified novel about imaginative and critical writing in a work of fiction that discusses ethical, cultural and theoretical issues.

The narrowest link between the protagonist, her lecture-narratives and the other characters is that of Costello and Blanche. The lesson entitled "The Humanities in Africa," in which both sisters meet after some time, traces simultaneously the major differences in their points of view and the common traits in personality and public behaviour. There is clearly an antagonism which emanates from both. On the one hand, Blanche minimises the so-called affirmative influence and social contribution of fiction writing in general, and hence she misconstrues Costello's merit. On the other hand, Costello believes she is playing an important role in humankind when she writes and endorses the benefits of the humanities. Both sisters' strength is condensed in the following passage: "She is a bit of a battleaxe, that's

all. She likes a good fight" (124), and in this opposition, the pronoun "she" can be ascribed to either one. Blanche too is known for her public speeches, a small price she has to pay in order to canvass support and funds for her rural Zululand hospital. Blanche believes that the true benefits of practicing humanity lie in rural South Africa, and only in the light of the original principles of the humanities posited by the Greeks. In this lesson, Blanche mounts an attack on the humanities in her acceptance speech. Costello disagrees with her sister's position about the humanities and her Gothic view of suffering. She collapses at the hospital after witnessing "the stick limbs, the bloated bellies, the great impassive eyes of children wasting away" (133) because she is not prepared to endure genuine suffering, and Blanche will always reproach Costello for this lingering weakness. Initially Costello is confused by Blanche's bitterness towards fiction writing when she wonders whether this resentment is not actually directed at her. The chasm between the two sisters on questions of art becomes more apparent.

Coetzee's protagonist, nevertheless, finally realises that she is generally misunderstood and she notices that people do not favour her stern comments on animal rights. Moreover, other Coetzean protagonists have undergone similar physical and intellectual alienation and scepticism when confronted with the same issues. For instance, Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* experiences withdrawal from her surroundings only to be reintegrated into the problems affecting South Africa as she befriends a vagrant and learns about her imminent death sentence because she has been diagnosed with cancer. The social upheaval happening in South Africa in the 1980s is transposed into Mrs Curren's calm domestic life, which is suddenly disrupted, when she sees violent police arrests and riots in Soweto. *Age of Iron* is a novel about political struggles and the dormant white South Africans and it further depicts the activists and innocent people behind the scenes. Its realistic representation contradicts Coetzee's usual writing techniques, but it tackles important ideas that heightened conscious awareness in South Africa and the world during the years of the state of Emergency. *Disgrace* (1999), which is clearly Coetzee's most overt post-apartheid novel, re-enacts the pastoral setting and storyline of *In the Heart of the Country* with a new leitmotif which hinges on violence and reconciliation, though it contends that the path to compromise is a hard one. In addition, the novel's main character, David Lurie, is a professor in his sixties who has renounced his academic career because of a sexual harassment charge and has confined himself to his daughter's farm in the Eastern Province so that he may finish his book on Lord Byron. Since he is an intellectual and academic, Lurie faces the same predicament as Costello, although the

philosophical musings always stem from him, as he battles for some recognition in the academy, and as he thinks over the issues of creativity and authorship.

In a similar way, and among Coetzee's earlier novels, Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* focuses on the issue of authorship with metafictional nuances much like *Foe*. The "master" of the novel's title is an invented Fyodor Dostoevsky and his story is narrated in a confessional mood in order to underline Coetzee's intertextual incursions. The novel retraces the fictions of Dostoevsky as it casts a new light on the formative masters of the Western canon because "contemporary fiction seems marked by the imperative of the eternal return … inextricably bound up with retelling" (Connor 123). In *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee has bridged the gap between fact and fiction and he has recorded the writer's relation to events. One of the characters associates words with affirmative action, and thus repudiates the power of textuality in the development of ideas. This calls to mind the discussion about realism in *Elizabeth Costello*, and the controversy between fiction and history which traverses Coetzee's books. In any consideration, he places emphasis on the issue of textuality despite differing claims by some of his characters. Mastery, in this sense, means that the author's ambivalence has allowed him to create a self-conscious text. In the novel there are references directed at the reader and the whole reading process, as well as passages about authorship and responsibility, especially perceptible when Dostoevsky enumerates his attempts to write two short stories within the plotline of Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*. Apart from Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* and *Crime and Punishment*, there are other allusions to world literature in the novel, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This "anxiety of influence" (Harold Bloom), which permeates Coetzee's novel, means that the materials and features found in earlier writers are directly borrowed or assimilated.

Intertextual influence is inevitable in the reading and the writing process of literary works as well as allowing for the conflict of discourses which generates contestation within the work. For Coetzee monologism is in opposition to the writer's goals so his writing is implicitly allied to the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism. The dialogic nature of writing permits the writer to awaken the countervoices in him or her and then speak with them. Fiction implies that its authors commune with their readers while the texts share the use of former texts. Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that the literary work is a site for dialogic interaction of multiple voices, and accordingly, "the novel requires speaking persons bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse, their own language" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 332). A polyphonic novel depicts a world in which no particularised discourse dominates, but where the

characters' modes of discourse are responses to their surroundings. Therefore, *Elizabeth Costello* is an overtly polyphonic novel because it incorporates European classics and other intertexts right up to the last pages culminating in the "Postscript" entitled "Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon." Her letter is based on Hofmannsthal's *The Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon* (1902), and here Costello imagines herself as wife to Lord Chandos and she writes to Francis Bacon assuring him that Chandos is not mad. At this instance in particular, Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* verifies that it is feasible to encompass the dialogic interaction between these two texts through generically and historically disparate fictional characters. The novel's "Postscript" concurrently highlights the role of intertextuality and the relevance of polyphonic narrative discourses at the same time as it summarises the bulk of the contending ideas that materialise in the novel through voices and countervoices.

The moment in the novel which plainly marks Costello's acknowledgment that her beliefs are altogether discredited is described in the Kafkaesque location of the afterlife in "At the Gate." Problems of mortality and senescence, which have been amply portrayed in Coetzee's novels, have been lingering in *Elizabeth Costello* from the beginning, individualised in Costello: "She has never taken care of her appearance; she used to be able to get away with it; now it shows. Old and tired" (3). Now standing before the gates of heaven, she is expected to draw up a statement wherein she must write down her beliefs. However, before Costello is granted passage through the gate she is required to state her case to a tribunal, and this tribunal casts some doubts on the validity of her statements precisely because she is known for her literary career and made-up stories. The judges distrust her reminiscence of the Dulgannon frogs and they have misgivings about her story given that she is an artist, and even the narrator corroborates, "today … she is disposed to believe in frogs … The objects of her belief appear to be quite random" (222). Costello advocates that as a fiction writer, "a secretary of the invisible" (199), she should not have beliefs because they are obstacles that interfere with her task, but her case grows weaker since the entire novel up to this point contradicts her defence of the non-believer. In part, Costello has lived according to her beliefs, and in her novels, she feigns other modes of being and she cites the hibernating Australian mudflat frogs because they embody the spirit of life which is what she, as a fiction writer, believes in.

The short story "As a Woman Grows Older" (2004) is comprised of dialogues between Costello, John and Helen revolving around the same arguments anticipated in the eighth lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* and it deals with the leitmotifs of ageing and mortality. The

discussions in "As a Woman" tend towards literary writing and authorship because fiction remains her speciality even if she attempted to debate on behalf of animal rights based on scientific argumentation. Here Costello reiterates her talent as she assures her children that she will restrict herself to fiction and abandon "hawking my opinions around." The irony in this announcement is manifest when Costello is connected to the eight lessons of the eponymous novel. In "As a Woman" and in *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee's readers recognise the use of the third person and the present tense as his style of narration, just as he had employed the same techniques in his autobiographies/memoirs *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002). The former narrates Coetzee's childhood in the present tense with third-person distance, while the latter chronicles his life in England in the 1960s. Additionally, in generic terms, this narrative style is considered unsuitable for autobiographical writing. He writes about his past self, both the boy and the youth, as *autre*, an unknown other who is a continuing presence. These memoirs are a changing point because Coetzee's earlier books depend on first-person narrators; however, *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) unveils the technique used in the following works of fiction until the most recent *Elizabeth Costello*, which exercises the present tense and third-person narration. It defines an additional element in the term *autre*biography that Coetzee has made a part of his fiction. In the beginning of *Elizabeth Costello,* the author abandons the traditional narratological past tense and first person: "In the spring of 1995 Elizabeth Costello travelled, or travels (present tense henceforth)" (2). This new approach to *autre*biography obviously requires a different look at the Coetzean treatment of alterity. Among the similarities and divergences between, on the one hand his memoirs and the pre-lecture-narrative pieces, and on the other *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee has decided to privilege the opinions of an ageing Australian white woman as the protagonist to embody his ideas.

Costello is Coetzee's mouthpiece in this series of lecture-narratives unlike his previous novels in which he privileged third-person narrators, apart from Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* and Susan Barton in *Foe*, significantly also women. Perhaps by using Costello as the creator and speaker of the problematic arguments in the lectures, Coetzee has attempted to distance himself from being narrowly identified with the points of view Costello supports. While at the same time cunningly impelling criticism to battle with the nature of that identification and thus to interrogate, like his work as a whole, the very contract being implied author, represented voice and readerly investment.

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